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The Interdisciplinary Research Journal
Volume 13, issue 3



Research Culture 2026

- Third-annual issue inspired by the University of Warwick's International Research Culture Conference (IRCC)
- Features Critical Reflections on interdisciplinarity, research precarity, fostering inclusive research culture and researching research culture through the Cultural Web and change-management studies

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Editorial, Volume 13, Issue 3:

Research Culture 2026

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Introduction

Welcome to the thirty-fifth edition of *Exchanges: The Interdisciplinary Research Journal*. This issue marks our third collaboration with the University of Warwick's National Centre for Research Culture, which organises and hosts the university's annual International Research Culture Conference (IRCC) on which this issue is based. Our previous Research Culture issues, published in 2024 and 2025, have proven to be some of the most popular and downloaded issues we have ever produced. At this point, we consider our Research Culture issue an annual tradition, one we hope to continue for the foreseeable future.

The collaboration makes sense since the mission of the IRCC and that of *Exchanges* could not be more aligned. Each year, the conference brings together a wide range of researchers for fruitful interdisciplinary discussions about how to improve research culture as a whole while providing opportunities to inspire further research connections, both key mandates for the journal too. This issue, Research Culture 2026, features submissions inspired by 2025's IRCC and is published to coincide with this year's conference, held 23 September in Coventry, UK. Conference participants were encouraged to submit expressions of interest following the event, many of which became the papers you will read in this edition. The issue focuses entirely on Critical Reflections, although we hope to publish a special section of long-form, peer-reviewed articles on research culture in an upcoming issue of *Exchanges* as well. As such, the tone of this issue strikes a balance between concrete, evidence-based approaches to research culture and more personal, anecdotal experiences. We think this is generally the right approach to the subject—after all, *culture* plays as much of a crucial role in research culture as *research* does. The following section provides a summary of what to expect in these pages regarding both.

In This Issue

Inclusivity has become a major watchword in research culture as of late, and for good reason. Including a diversity of experiences and points of view not only helps researchers working on the margins to get a better foothold within the culture of an institution or discipline; it also helps to strengthen those institutions and disciplines as a whole. Mary Assad and Natalie L. Marchant's Critical Reflection offers a case in point, exploring the integration of more diverse voices into the research culture of their home institution, University College London. In 'Embedding Inclusive Cultural Change Through Community Voice: UCL's Research Culture Community Steering Group', the authors explore how the steering group they created 'integrates the individual voices and lived experiences of the research community and encourages researchers' direct participation in governance as a way to foster a sense of belonging and promote inclusion within institutional research culture change' (p. 1).

Using change-management frameworks, they detail UCL's bid to build a community-led researcher network pooled from throughout the university. Their approach helps embed more diverse community voices into governance and identifies a greater set of priorities, leading to institutional change not just at UCL, but also hopefully offering key takeaways for research networks across institutions: namely, the necessity of direct engagement with communities, the acknowledgment of their varied contributions, and structure, clarity and flexibility when it comes to diverse research culture engagement.

Precarity is of course another big buzzword in any discussion of current research culture. Ash Collins provides a Critical Reflection on the ways in which collective action can help address employment precarity in this regard. Their paper discusses the University of Nottingham's Revisiting Employment Contracts: Helping Under-represented Researchers Develop, Lead and Excel (REC HURDLE) project, which was created in 2024 as a response to the challenges of employment precarity in the sector. The project 'takes a multi-faceted approach to improving the practice and literature around employment precarity, seeking to change local culture and practice and recommending next steps' throughout the sector as a whole, via pilot initiatives (such as the pooling of staff resources and the use of bridge funding to employ staff between research funding contracts), 'root-and-branch' institutional reviews and development opportunities (p. 21). The reflection identifies many barriers to REC HURDLE's goals but also details the more practice-led and proactive response of the Research Precarity Working Group, which was founded in 2025 'for the purpose of taking collective action to reduce the level and impact of employment

precarity in research-related careers at higher-education institutions', specifically advocating and agitating for grassroots change (p. 29).

In 'Researching Research Culture: An organisational culture approach', Ruby Roberts, Jane Williams and Rhona Flin take a slightly more arms-length approach to the topic, offering 'lessons learned from organisational psychology that can be applied to the study of research culture, including understanding its underlying dimensions and enabling mechanisms' (p. 37). Originally arising from an interdisciplinary working group founded at Scotland's Robert Gordon University, the organisational culture lens, the authors contend, offers a valuable 'broader perspective' for research culture analysis, one that adopts a more quantifiable approach, specifically through community surveys (p. 39). The authors detail how they developed a pilot survey in 2021, 'in response to a paucity of validated questionnaires that capture the key research culture dimensions', which they refined in response to feedback, even including a how-to guide to developing similar research culture surveys at other institutions.

Fola Ikpehai takes a similar analytical, evidence-based approach to her Critical Reflection on research culture, in this case using the model of the 'Cultural Web' as a tool for the analysis of specifically early-career research culture. Originally developed by Johnson & Scholes as a tool for studying the organisational methods of corporate culture, the Culture Web model, Ikpehai argues, can just as helpfully be applied to an interrogation of institutional research culture at higher-education institutions.

Specifically, Ikpehai uses the Cultural Web to argue that, rather than seeing early-career research needs as complex, thorny and difficult to address, we can view them as straight-forward and even transparent. Rather, it is institutional reluctance that stops ECR culture from being improved, not conflicting researcher priorities or ECR reluctance to participate in cultural change. Ikpehai uses her Critical Reflection to initiate an impassioned call to action for systemic change, one that 'us[es] the Cultural Web model to make visible the relationship between an institution's stated cultural ambitions and its organisational mechanisms through which particular research cultures are reproduced' (p. 60).

Yanyan Li's Critical Reflection continues the focus on early-career researchers, touching on themes of inclusion and precarity explored in several of the previous reflections mentioned. In 'The Interdisciplinary Condition: Navigating precarity, identity and epistemic translation as an early-career researcher', Li ambitiously tackles all these heady themes in relation to the journey of ECRs working across disciplines. Her first-person account of navigating this complex research landscape even calls into question the researcher's sense of self, detailing both the emotional challenges of feeling like a research 'outsider', unsure where to locate

one's own research culture, and the epistemic challenges of different disciplinary approaches. For instance, she details the journey from her home department of applied linguistics, a field in which she is trained to 'view knowledge as always socially situated' to the fields of science and medicine, in which 'credibility is usually measured by quantification, by numeric data' (p. 68). While these boundary-spanning practices might evince a sense of precarity, they can also help build resilience, helping to construct a 'reflexive ethos' that emphasises empathy (p. 69).

Li also contributes to another Critical Reflection, 'Rethinking Interdisciplinarity as Intercultural Dialogue: Peer-to-peer conversations and inclusive research culture', another entry that emphasises the importance of disciplinary collaboration, conversation and inclusion. Co-authored by colleagues at the University of Warwick's School of Education, Learning and Communication Sciences (SELCS), including Prof Richard Smith, this piece considers the SELCS project 'Countering Silos and Hierarchies through Peer-to-Peer Research-in-Progress Conversations'. Specifically it looks at phase two of the project, which involved developing 'inclusive research conversation spaces' via interactive games, guided dialogues and hypothetical research tasks (p. 80). Such 'conversational interventions', according to the authors, 'can bring to the surface and reshape the cultural dynamics that underpin inclusive research practices' (p. 80). The reflection considers how departmental 'silos and hierarchies' can be combatted with conscious effort, helping to establish fairer and more truly collaborative research frameworks.

In 'Co-Creating Meaningful HEI Work Experience Programmes Through Research Collaboration', Craig Carnegie, Helena Sidgwick, Emily Birkett and Sarah Conner discuss what it says on the proverbial tin: how to create effective work experience placements for school-aged students through collaboration across universities. Specifically, the authors discuss their own informal research network, established among universities in the UK's Midlands region, including the University of Warwick and the University of Birmingham. Specifically targeting students interested in careers in science, technology and medicine, the initiative built off previously established work-experience programmes at their respective institutions.

The authors detail a specific case study at the University of Birmingham, which resulted in significant improvements to the design of the programme, informed by findings from a Warwick Manufacturing Group report recommending 'structured project-based work experience models built around defined activity types and tailored to student ability and interest' (p. 102). The group shared these findings during a series of ten-minute workshops held at IRCC2025, an experience which 'showed the value of collaboration and the importance of openly sharing' (p. 104)—a

key reason why the IRCC remains such an important event in the research culture calendar. It is also one of the many reasons why *Exchanges* plans on maintaining our own meaningful and fruitful collaborative experience with the IRCC indefinitely.

Finally, given the subject matter of this issue, I would be remiss not to address the recent death of University of Cambridge sociology professor Jason Arday, a shocking tragedy that has reverberated throughout the higher-education research community in the UK and abroad, and one that has personally affected me deeply, as I'm sure it has many of you reading this. And while it is a shock, it is also sadly perhaps not a surprise. As a neurodivergent, racially minoritised and working-class scholar, Jason in many ways epitomised many of the intersectional vulnerabilities discussed in this volume. He was also, of course, a unique individual who experienced a singular set of circumstances. Regardless of any controversy surrounding his work or life, his story is a clarion call to the research community that we *must* do better to protect and support our colleagues in physical, financial and/or emotional distress. Otherwise we aren't worthy of the name 'community' in the first place.

Call for Papers

Last month we announced the call for expressions of interest regarding our upcoming issue Navigating Precarity in Higher Education. So far we have received an enthusiastic response—again, not surprising given how relevant this issue is to so many of us in the current HE climate. The deadline to submit an abstract is **19 October 2026**. Please get in touch if you have any related questions. You can read more about the issue and the kind of submissions we are looking for and submit an abstract [here](#).

New Issue Pitches

While *Exchanges* no longer accepts unsolicited submissions, we continue to solicit pitches for upcoming issues of the journal. These can cover any topic as long as it is approached from an interdisciplinary perspective: i.e., by exploring how various disciplinary approaches work together to help illuminate the topic and create fruitful and effective research collaborations. If you have an idea, please don't hesitate to email us to have an informal discussion and receive more information on how to make an official issue pitch. To get a better idea of what we are looking for, we suggest familiarising yourself with past our past special issues [here](#).

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For general inquiries (for instance, to discuss a potential submission), contact us at: exchanges-journal@warwick.ac.uk.

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Embedding Inclusive Cultural Change Through Community Voice: UCL's Research Culture Community Steering Group

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Abstract

This Critical Reflection explores how University College London's (UCL's) Research Culture Community Steering Group (CSG) integrates the individual voices and lived experiences of the research community and encourages researchers' direct participation in governance as a way to foster a sense of belonging and promote inclusion within institutional research culture change. Launched in January 2024, the CSG works in partnership with the UCL Research Culture Programme (RCP). This article considers the CSG's first two years, examining how member feedback in 2024 and 2025 shaped strategic priorities and plans, contributed to projects, and revealed systemic barriers relating to equity, wellbeing and research environments. Using change-management frameworks, it reviews the challenges of implementation, including the complexity of governance and balancing competing priorities within a large, decentralised institution. The analysis shows how early engagement, inclusivity and structured feedback loops build trust and support sustainable, people-centred organisational cultural change. Finally, the article considers how the CSG model informs UCL's next phase of the RCP through strengthening alignment with governance structures, clarifying member roles, and sharing learning and best practice. It offers transferable insights for research-intensive universities embedding inclusive community voices within decision-making and strategies.

Keywords: research culture; community-led change; change management; lived experience; higher education governance; inclusion

Introduction: Research Culture Context and Sector Drivers

In the UK higher education sector, funders and government increasingly recognise the importance of fair and inclusive research cultures that support and retain talent in order to achieve responsible research excellence (**Moran et al., 2020; Shift Insight et al., 2024**). This priority is reinforced in the UK's Research Excellence Framework (REF) 2029, whose Strategy, People and Research Environment (SPRE) guidance will account for 20 percent of assessment, an increase from 15 percent from REF 2021. This underscores expectations that institutions demonstrate supportive, inclusive and well-governed research environments alongside outputs and impact, while also acknowledging different resource capacities (**REF, 2025**).

Across the sector, universities face persistent issues, including inequities in the progression and recognition of researchers (**Woolston, 2021; Advance HE, 2024**), pressures associated with hyper-competition (**Naddaf, 2025**), the uneven visibility of professional services and technical contributions (**Toogood, 2025**), increasing workloads, and decreasing researcher wellbeing (**Pace et al., 2021; Gewin, 2022; Stead et al., 2025**). Many institutions are developing strategies in response to these challenges to foster collaborative and responsible research environments. However, initiatives imposed without sensitivity to local contexts can generate resistance, particularly in decentralised, research-intensive environments where change is rarely linear. Aligning institutional direction with local realities is therefore essential to build the capability for positive change.

Sustainable cultural change requires both strategic leadership and community ownership. In higher education, bottom-up approaches are often emphasised; however, without complementary top-down leadership, alignment and resourcing, their impact can be limited. While process-based approaches (such as the REF) incentivise standards and accountability, they cannot fully capture the relational and context-specific nature of research culture (**O'Connor et al., 2026**). Culture is enacted through everyday interactions, decision-making and informal norms influencing environments. It therefore encompasses behaviours, incentives, relationships and lived experience—not simply policy or strategy (**The Royal Society, 2017; Canti et al., 2021**).

In order to build the capacity for meaningful change, ongoing collaboration between academic leaders, change-management professionals and research communities is critical to test assumptions, identify unintended consequences and refine interventions in real time and to align lived realities with institutional priorities. Evidence indicates that active sponsorship from leaders, adequate personnel and financial resourcing,

and participatory approaches involving the community are key to driving institutional change at scale (**Lines, 2004; Hiatt, 2006; Marshall, 2025**). Empowering the research community to co-create change—rather than just being subject to it—promotes shared commitment and integrates lived experience into institutional processes. Such participatory approaches can strengthen trust and support sustainable change by aligning strategic ambition with the needs and experiences of the research communities they seek to serve (**Clarke, 2013**). While in principle, the embedding of community voices within decision-making is essential, the practice remains uneven and difficult to sustain. Under leadership of the Director of Research Culture, UCL established the Research Culture Community Steering Group (CSG) to connect community insight with institutional planning and delivery in response to both sector expectations and priorities beyond assessments.

The following Critical Reflection draws on the complementary perspectives of co-authors Natalie Marchant, an associate professor in the Faculty of Brain Sciences and inaugural Chair of the Research Culture Community Steering Group (CSG) at University College London (UCL) and Mary Assad, *Change Manager* for UCL's Research Culture team, Office of the Vice-Provost for Research, Innovation & Global Engagement (RIGE). Launched in January 2024, the CSG works as a strategic mechanism within the UCL Research Culture Programme (RCP).

UCL's Research Culture Roadmap and Governance

In recognition of the importance of research culture (and several years prior to the changes announced for REF 2029), in 2021 UCL undertook extensive consultations with its research community to understand its strengths and areas for improvement. These insights informed a ten-year Research Culture Roadmap, aligned with UCL's Strategic Plan 2022–27, to guide UCL to enhance its research environments, reflecting a whole-institution approach and a long-term framework for cultural improvement (**UCL, 2023; UCL, 2022**). The Roadmap brings together new and existing strands of activity based on five key themes: (1) transparent and fair career development, (2) people-centred leadership and management, (3) opportunities to collaborate and innovate, (4) openness and integrity in our research and innovation, and (5) supportive and inclusive environment.

UCL's RCP delivers and supports multiple institutional and locally led grassroots projects and initiatives that have been designed to progress the implementation of the Roadmap and promote shared ownership across the research community. Promoting shared ownership reflects a growing

emphasis on participatory approaches that connect institutional strategy with the experiential realities of day-to-day research practice (**Rees & Todd, 2024; Todd, 2025**). This is integral, for as one of our colleagues observed, 'There is no research culture without human experience'.

The RCP is led by a dedicated Research Culture team at UCL, reflecting the scale and complexity of coordinating cultural change across one of the UK's largest research-intensive universities. Additionally, a Research Culture Programme Board has been established, comprising Vice-Deans (Research) representing all eleven faculties alongside senior leaders across research-related domains, to provide strategic oversight and align delivery with the Roadmap priorities.

Designing a Community-Led Mechanism

Origin and demand

In this context, the Research Culture CSG was formed in 2024 to intentionally include the lived experience of people from across the research community and to foster shared ownership in positive change in research culture (**UCL, 2025**). Designed as a community-led group, it offers localised, inclusive perspectives on the strategic delivery of institutional changes to culture, providing insights and advice to the Research Culture Programme Board while ensuring strategic priorities remain grounded in the realities of research practice.

Co-author Natalie L. Marchant was appointed the CSG chair via an open recruitment process from within the research community and serves as the independent academic lead. Another open call invited self-nominations to join from within UCL's research community. In total, more than two hundred staff and researchers across faculties, roles and career stages applied, signalling strong interest amongst academic, research and professional services staff to actively shape research culture change. Of these, twenty-two 'core' members were selected by the chair, ensuring all eleven faculties and relevant Vice-Provost (VP) offices were represented and spanning diverse roles, disciplines and career stages. These volunteer core members commit to attend term meetings, provide insight on RCP initiatives, and act as a bridge between local research communities and programme activity. Additional involvement is optional; the role is designed to be light touch in consideration of existing workload and responsibilities.

Roughly 180 'pool' members form the wider CSG network. The CSG model intentionally balances structure with adaptability. While the group was not originally planned at this scale, high interest in the research

community allowed the network to encompass broad institutional connections, providing an engaged pool of members for core member rotation and optional participation in RCP consultations, workshops and activities where relevant. Together, core and pool members form a distributed network supporting engagement and insight across UCL's research community. This approach enables a broadly inclusive culture while maintaining operational coherence across a large, decentralised institution. Additionally, its scale and diversity of participation strengthens the group's legitimacy and breadth of insight, although it also introduces administrative and expectation-management challenges, which we explore later in this article.

Role of core members

The CSG core members are positioned not as formal representatives but as local facilitators and champions of change, amplifying community perspectives and connecting personal insights with RCP priorities through their networks.

CSG core members' remit is to:

- **amplify community voices:** reveal lived experience within local research environments, highlighting barriers, enablers and positive practice;
- **inform initiatives:** contribute insights and disciplinary expertise to shape RCP projects, programmes and tools;
- **support engagement:** share key messages, opportunities and consultations through local networks, encouraging participation and awareness of RCP activities;
- **act as champions:** model inclusive behaviours and collaboration through their own practice.

Core members also connect with pool members and faculty leaders, strengthening local engagement and extending reach across networks.

Principles underpinning CSG cohesion

Principles of co-production shape how the group operates, fostering a sense of cohesion and shared ownership (**International Association for Public Participation [IAP2], 2017; Scottish Co-Production Network, 2024**). These principles emphasise psychological safety and distributed leadership, enabling members to challenge constructively when necessary

and to contribute diverse perspectives grounded in local realities while supporting trust, inclusion and shared responsibility for shaping research environments (**Shift Insight et al., 2024**). The scale and diversity of this participatory ethos strengthens legitimacy and breadth of insight but also introduces complexity in coordination, expectations and role clarity.

Approach, Implementation and Reflections

The following sections examine early impacts, emerging tensions and operational challenges, as well as the conditions required for sustainable, community-engaged cultural change. We also identify transferable knowledge for institutions seeking to embed community voices within their governance and decision-making structures, through a reflection on lessons learned (see Appendix and Future Directions). Together, this reflective collaboration mirrors the broader premise underpinning the CSG: that meaningful, sustainable and positive cultural change requires the continual sharing of relational insights, leadership skills, organisational challenges, and professional expertise.

Approach: Embedding community voices into governance

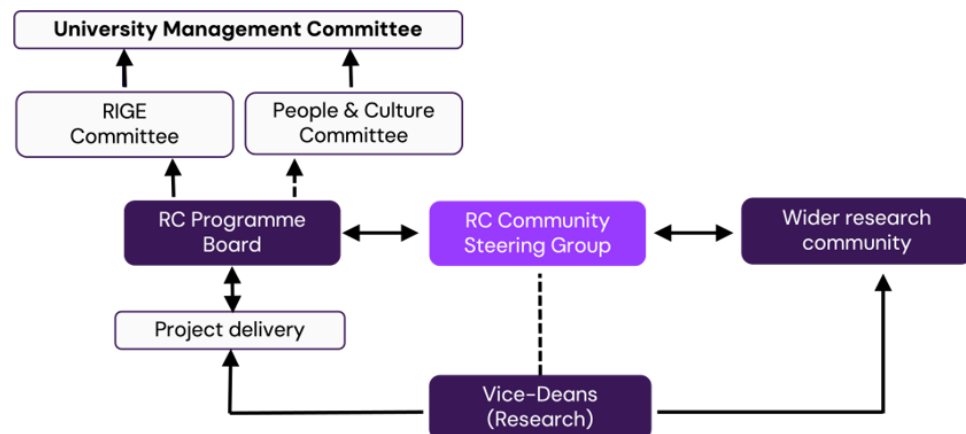
The CSG provides bidirectional information flow between the research community and senior leaders via Vice-Deans (Research) and the Research Culture Programme Board. This strengthens board decision-making by ensuring the lived experiences of research community members inform priorities, complement data and governance processes, and build capability for locally enacted change across faculties.

Community feedback informs local research culture ‘dashboards’—faculty-level summaries designed to provide stakeholders with easier access to qualitative CSG insight and local priorities—bringing together key research culture themes in accessible formats alongside indicators of a responsible research culture. This highlights variation across faculties and complements quantitative data with qualitative responses, particularly from underrepresented groups such as those from minoritised-ethnic backgrounds or those on fixed-term contracts.

Regular updates (via email, online posts and website refreshes), workshops and resource-sharing promote knowledge exchange and local dissemination of RCP priorities. The exploration of the lived experience of research staff often reveals systemic barriers and informs the co-development of initiatives, indicators and success measures, while dashboards and opportunities to provide feedback reinforce transparency, trust and sustained participation. This creates clear pathways through

which multiple and diverse perspectives critically inform decision-making (Figure 1, below).

Figure 1: UCL Research Culture Community Steering Group (CSG) positioning within institutional governance structure



Approach: Change framework and engagement

The CSG strategy was informed by established change-management approaches to support shared understanding and sustained engagement across a large, decentralised institution (Richard et al., 2021). Drawing on Prosci's 'ADKAR' ('Awareness, Desire, Knowledge, Ability, Reinforcement') model (Hiatt, 2006), this strategy provides a flexible framework and shared language for navigating change rather than a prescriptive methodology. ADKAR is grounded in the principle that organisational change is realised through individual change. Examples of how this has informed the CSG's approach are outlined below (Table 1, next page).

This approach enables locally meaningful engagement while maintaining institutional coherence, emphasising ongoing feedback loops, barrier identification and reinforcement of ongoing change. While such models support sense-making and momentum, they do not address underlying structural inequalities or cultural hierarchies alone. Instead, they function as guiding tools that must be adapted to context.

Table 1: The ADKAR framework in a CSG context

ADKAR Stage	Concept	Actions	Outcomes	Learnings
Awareness <i>Why change? What happens if we don't embed community voice?</i>	Understand why research culture change is needed and the role of the CSG	Introduced CSG; dashboards; cross-faculty insight sharing	Raised visibility of priorities, extending reach, connecting silos, amplifying voices	Awareness varied; governance links and purpose not always understood, requiring ongoing communication
Desire <i>Fostering motivation and engagement through representation</i>	Motivation to engage and contribute to research culture change through representation	Open call; voluntary participation; cross-role involvement	Strong appetite for involvement, proactive ownership and shared purpose	Expectations differed; voluntary nature needs clearer framing
Knowledge <i>Equipping CSG members with tools, knowledge to engage</i>	Sharing and cascading change, key information and toolkits; clarifying roles and expectations	Workshops, briefings, Microsoft Teams channels, shared resources	Enabled learning, local conversations and knowledge flow	Risk of information overload; need for concise messaging
Ability <i>Enacting change by revealing barriers</i>	Applying insight to uncover barriers and shape initiatives	Lived experience input; early feedback on projects	Surfaced barriers early; improved initiative design	Structural constraints and workload pressures limit capacity
Reinforcement <i>Sustaining change through feedback review</i>	Sustaining change through visibility, feedback loops and reinforcement mechanisms	Dashboards, updates, feedback loops	Transparency strengthened trust and participation	Requires continuous feedback loops; role clarity and governance alignment to reinforce sustainability

Implementation and emerging impacts

During the group's initial phase in 2024/25, the CSG focused on building a shared identity, trust and a visible route for the research community to shape RCP work. Creating a feeling of psychological safety enabled open dialogue across roles, disciplines and faculties, while meetings and workshops surfaced systemic barriers affecting staff (such as heavy workload, burnout, hierarchical relationships, etc.), which were not always visible through formal surveys or governance routes. In the CSG's second

year, focus shifted towards strengthening contributions to the RCP, information flow and governance. Engagement remained high. Since the group's inception, core members have participated in six formal term-time meetings and three additional sessions, providing key feedback on current initiatives. They also participated in twenty one-to-one interviews with Mary, enabling the deeper exploration of local challenges and cultural barriers.

Engagement levels indicated a strong appetite to contribute to institutional change beyond formal role expectations. CSG Core and Pool members contributed voluntarily to over eleven Research Culture activities, including:

- **dashboards:** faculty-level summaries of qualitative CSG insights to support decision-making;
- **funding:** improving faculty- and seed-funding processes through CSG member connections and insights to inspire locally led initiatives;
- **priorities and projects:** shaping initiatives, including academic promotions, Responsible Research Culture Indicators and the UCL RCP Phase 2 Plan (2025–28);
- **toolkit:** influencing development of the Research Culture Toolkit, including grant and REF 2029 preparation guidance;
- **roadmap:** incorporating CSG feedback on the physical environment into Research Culture Roadmap goals, highlighting the influence and power of community voice on institutional priorities.

Early engagement with the research community through the CSG enabled faster identification of variations in need across faculties and reduced duplication of effort. Members reported that the CSG model felt authentic and motivating, encouraging transparency, trust and cross-faculty understanding and helping shift perceptions away from a centrally driven plan for change towards a more collaborative approach.

Enabling Community Voices Across Institutions

While the early impacts of the CSG demonstrate the value of embedding community voices, the implementation of the group surfaced tensions that provided important lessons for institutional level change. Below we document three main takeaways.

Integrating lived-experience insight into decision-making

The CSG highlighted the value of feedback from individuals within research communities. Qualitative insights drawn from individual interviews, meetings, workshops and project outputs revealed variation of micro-cultures across faculties and disciplines. While we strive to incorporate a diverse range of perspectives across faculties and VP offices, at a departmental level participation and representation remain uneven, reflecting the voluntary nature of the role and the organisational scale. However imperfect and partial, representation is still valuable—particularly for minoritised voices, such as those from minoritised-ethnic, neurodivergent, or disabled groups, often underrepresented in quantitative datasets.

While quantitative data offers structured, retrospective indicators, it is inherently partial and removed from day-to-day experience. Community insight, by contrast, provides grounded, real-time perspectives from within research environments, capturing how culture is experienced and evolving, and revealing issues that formal mechanisms may overlook. This creates a tension between openness and breadth of coverage; and in some cases, it creates uncertainty for faculty leaders about how such insight should be interpreted alongside formal data and governance.

However, qualitative insights anchored in human relationships are intended for use *alongside* quantitative metrics to strengthen holistic understanding and inform decision-making. Faculty leaders highlighted the need for clearer integration of the CSG qualitative insights and dashboard findings with existing data sources—such as staff survey results, Responsible Research Culture Indicators and Athena Swan metrics for gender parity—which are not aligned with faculty governance cycles, approval processes or decision-making routes, limiting their ability to support timely action and accountability. Strengthening alignment with existing planning rhythms would enhance their usability and influence.

Local context, perceived centralisation and the roots of resistance

As CSG engagement has matured, it has identified overlaps with existing faculty governance and research professional services roles. This highlights the need for greater alignment and clarity in roles and responsibilities, and improved communication and feedback routes. While relationships between the CSG, the Research Culture Programme Board and faculty structures remain clear at an institutional level, gaps have emerged locally between faculty leaders and their CSG representatives. As noted above, CSG members can often identify risks or opportunities earlier than formal feedback processes, but processes or routes for these insights to inform local planning were not always clear or standardised. Stronger integration

would enable earlier decision-making, reduce duplication and better support RCP delivery. This would enhance the CSG's credibility while giving faculty leaders real-time perspectives that complement formal, quantitative data.

Regarding role clarity, different faculty structures mean that responsibilities sometimes overlap between faculty leaders, research support roles and CSG members. This creates uncertainty in representation and information flow. Greater locally adaptable role clarity would reduce role duplication and support sustainable engagement, recognising we must remain context-responsive and adaptable to differing faculty and role configurations.

As previously mentioned, the scale of interest in joining the CSG led to the decision to create larger pool membership beyond the originally planned core member group. Over time, it became clear that some pool members were uncertain about their roles, and a few core members were unsure about their expected level of interaction with pool members. Work is ongoing to clarify engagement routes and role expectations while maintaining a light-touch approach, increasing opportunities to contribute and improving communication. Further clarity to the CSG Terms of Reference would help avoid confusion.

Sustainability, voluntary labour and expectation management

Participation in the CSG revealed the significant emotional and relational labour involved in community-led culture change. CSG members often draw on personal experience, professional commitment and values-driven motivation to sustain engagement, which builds trust and belonging, yet this work is not always formally recognised. Volunteer-led models risk creating an uneven burden and burnout, particularly where participation intersects with existing service roles, minoritisation and 'academic housework', the often-invisible, rarely rewarded labour that helps support an institution.

There is an ethical responsibility for institutions to ensure that participatory structures do not disproportionately rely on those with the particular lived experience of marginalisation. Ironically, without intentional design and recognition, participatory approaches risk reproducing the inequities they seek to address. Sustainability therefore requires clarity, proportionate expectations and visible recognition. In practice, this has meant maintaining a light-touch model, clarifying role expectations, and embedding engagement within existing faculty structures.

The CSG chair role, initially voluntary, evolved to include partial buy-out funded support from the RCP budget, recognising that effective

stewardship requires protected time and institutional investment. This support provides specified time for meaningful engagement while minimising impact on the chair's departmental responsibilities. This both redistributes workload and signals the role's importance, with arrangements tailored to the chair's individual commitments rather than being fixed.

The experience of creating and maintaining the CSG also highlighted the resource implications of coordinating participatory governance. Administrative demands proved greater than anticipated, underscoring the need for proportionate resourcing and scalable approaches for institutions of various size and capacity. Dedicated coordination capacity enables continuity, transparency and follow-through. However, resource constraints vary across institutions. Therefore, scalable approaches may involve integrating insight within existing committees, rotating facilitation roles, or adopting lighter-touch consultation mechanisms.

As seen across many voluntary equality, diversity and inclusion (EDI) initiatives, participatory culture change cannot be sustained by relying solely on invisible or uncompensated labour. It requires balancing relational engagement with structural support, including allyship, senior sponsorship and appropriate resourcing. These tensions further strengthened our iterative, learning-based approach. Collectively, these reflections emphasise the need for relational engagement, shared understanding and adaptive implementation. The following section contains a bullet-point summary of practical lessons learned when embedding community voices in research culture.

Learning Outcomes and Their Implications for Practice

The first phase of the Community Steering Group highlighted several practical lessons for institutions seeking to embed community voice within research culture change. Together, these lessons highlight the fact that sustainable culture change depends not only on structures and strategy, but on establishing relationships, clarity in communication, and the creation of conditions that enable people to participate meaningfully:

- **Governance and participation must work together.** Community insight has the greatest influence when integrated within decision-making governance structures rather than operating in parallel to strengthen legitimacy, transparency and trust. It is not intended to be statistically representative but to complement quantitative data and inform discussion and action.

- **Direct engagement matters.** One-to-one and group conversations, facilitated by a member of the Research Culture team, strengthen trust, enable nuance and surface hidden concerns that may not emerge through written consultation alone.
- **How change is introduced affects engagement.** Early dashboard rollout demonstrated that complex or sensitive information shared solely via email can generate confusion or resistance. Phasing implementation through conversations and adaptation to local context improves understanding and acceptance.
- **Participation requires structure and role clarity.** Clear expectations, well-defined touchpoints and alignment with existing faculty processes reduce role duplication and help volunteers engage without an added individual burden.
- **Recognition and reward support sustainability.** Acknowledging contributions through visibility, career frameworks and protected time reinforces value and avoids over-reliance on invisible labour.
- **Culture change is contextual, not one-size-fits-all.** Faculties operate as distinct environments with their own norms, pressures and priorities. Flexible models enable alignment while respecting local contexts.
- **Feedback loops sustain motivation and trust.** Visible evidence of how contributions shape decisions, strengthen engagement and facilitate shared ownership is important.
- **Leader sponsorship and adequate resourcing enable change.** Active leader sponsorship and resourcing to protect capacity and coordination support are essential to sustain participation and translate insight into action.

Conclusion and Future Directions

Looking ahead, the next phase of this participatory approach will focus on strengthening CSG connections with faculty governance while preserving its community-led ethos. Scheduled check-ins between CSG representatives and their faculty leadership (e.g., research development leads, Vice-Deans (EDI), and research support teams) and Vice-Deans (Research) will provide protected time for local dashboard review, funding discussions and culture priorities. Flexible local adaptation will enable the integration of community members' voices into these faculty conversations and activities, balancing consistency with local autonomy to improve alignment, accountability and reduce duplication.

Clear multi-directional routes of influence between the CSG, faculties and the Research Culture Programme Board will ensure community insight informs strategy while remaining connected to local priorities. Enhanced participation pathways will support pool members seeking deeper involvement while maintaining optional engagement and protecting volunteer capacity through existing structures and roles. This includes clearer routes for contribution (e.g., through targeted consultations, thematic working groups and feedback loops) and regular communication to maintain visibility without increasing individual burdens.

This model will be trialled and reviewed for effectiveness, sustainability and faculty variation, with monitoring of engagement, dashboard use and feedback loops supporting continuous improvement. While context-specific to UCL, sharing learning outcomes with peer institutions and engaging in cross-sector dialogue will support the development of participatory approaches to positive research culture change. This is important because research culture is also shaped by international and disciplinary networks beyond the institution (O'Connor et al., 2026).

This Critical Reflection highlights the opportunities and tensions involved in integrating community voices at scale within a large research-intensive university. The CSG demonstrates how embedding lived experience within governance can strengthen trust, transparency and shared ownership while ensuring institutional priorities remain grounded in research practice. This positions the larger research community not only as a mechanism for engagement but as a form of distributed governance shaping institutional priorities.

Early impacts show that participatory structures can improve decision-making, reveal systemic barriers and strengthen engagement when supported by the sponsorship of research leaders, adequate resources and clear feedback loops. At the same time, sustaining community-led change remains complex. Cultural transformation is relational, iterative and context-specific, requiring partnership, the balancing of strategic direction with local realities, the recognition of voluntary labour, and continual clarity regarding roles and expectations.

Ultimately, sustainable research culture change depends on partnership: between leadership and community, academic and professional expertise and institutions learning from one another. Embedding community insight within governance is not a one-off intervention but an ongoing commitment to listening, adapting and evolving. As universities continue to navigate shifting expectations and complex research environments, participatory mechanisms such as the CSG offer a transferable model for aligning strategy with lived experience, ensuring that research culture is shaped both for, and with, the research community.

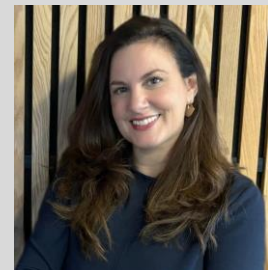
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Collective Action Against Research-Related Employment Precarity: Learnings from an institutional project and an emerging national movement

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Abstract

This Critical Reflection details the individual, institutional and national impacts of employment precarity in research-related roles, summarising findings from the University of Nottingham's Revisiting Employment Contracts: Helping Under-represented Researchers Develop, Lead and Excel (REC HURDLE) project. Current sector-wide evidence and practices are summarised, and recommendations are made for changes to organisational processes and research culture to lessen both the extent and severity of employment precarity in UK higher education. Ongoing work to this aim through the national Research Precarity Working Group is detailed. The emotional and practical considerations of effecting change in this area, within a national research ecosystem under financial strain, are considered.

Keywords: fixed-term contracts; research culture; employment precarity; collective action; EDI; professional development

Introduction

Employment precarity is a pervasive, long-standing global issue affecting individuals pursuing research-related careers at academic institutions, with impacts at an individual, institutional and sector-wide level (**UCU, 2023; Advance HE, 2024**). A nebulous, broadly defined term, it has no legal definition but refers to conditions of uncertain, unstable or insecure work, including informal, short-term and zero-hours employment models (**Pósch et al., 2020; Standing, 2011**).

Higher Education Statistics Agency (HESA) data indicates that across all academic staff at UK higher education institutions (HEIs)—spanning research, teaching, technical, and professional services—29 percent were employed on fixed-term contracts in 2022 (**HESA, 2023**). The University and College Union's (UCU) (**2019**) report indicated that, disproportionately, 68 percent of research-only academic staff were employed on fixed-term contracts. A substantial body of evidence demonstrates that individuals from under-represented and minoritised groups are more frequently precariously employed and more severely impacted, with HESA (**2022**) data supporting this across age, ethnicity, disability and gender (**Advance HE, 2024**).

Legal obligations exist for organisations to provide employment protections, including permanent employment, beyond two years of continuous service, with this reducing to six months of service from January 2027 (**Jackson, 2026**). Despite this, the extent and impact of precarity in academia are pervasive due to the relationship between employment contracts and research grant funding in HEIs (**UCU, 2019; Mason & Megoran, 2021**). To meet legal obligations whilst accounting for the uncertainty of external grant income, a significant fraction of staff in UK HEIs are employed on a contract titled 'open-ended subject to fixed funding', 'permanent with underlying funding' (PWUF) or a similar variation (**Coe & Kernohan, 2025**).

Estimating the proportion of staff on such contracts is complex, as they are grouped within HESA data alongside other permanent contracts. As such, HESA's (**2022**) demonstration of 70 percent permanent employment among academic staff must be read in context. By contrast, University and College Union's (UCU's) report (**2023**), which collates data from freedom of information requests, states that across UK HEIs, an average of 66 percent of research staff are precariously employed. At individual universities, this figure ranges from two to 99 percent, demonstrating substantial variation across the sector (**UCU, 2023**). PWUF contracts involve the same underlying occupational instability, can cause many staff the same issues with mortgages and visas as fixed-term contracts (FTCs),

and have a similar disproportionate impact on minoritised groups (**Kahn et al., 2024**).

Due to this inconsistent and localised nature of contract data collection within and between institutions, precarious contract use in UK HEIs is poorly monitored (**UCU, 2019; HESA, 2023**). Universities may choose to become signatories of agreements such as the Researcher Development Concordat (**Vitae, 2019**), which aim to increase parity of experience and opportunity. Despite this, monitoring of adherence to these policies varies greatly by department, institution and funder (**UCU, 2019**).

Poorly monitored employment processes at HEIs can expose staff to systemic risks, including discrimination, exploitation and harassment by a line manager or principal research investigator (**Mason & Megoran, 2021**). The degree of influence senior staff may have over an individual's future employment leaves many feeling unable to report such behaviour (**Mason & Megoran, 2021**).

Employment precarity has worsened with political and financial changes in the sector and the UK (**UCU, 2023; Universities UK, 2026**), including rising energy costs and international student fees and reductions in government research funding budgets. Universities UK (**2026**) project an overall £3.7 billion reduction in funding to HEIs by 2029–30. Despite this, data on existing and previous initiatives and alternative employment models to counter precarity is sparse and poorly coordinated sector-wide (**UCU, 2019**).

The University of Nottingham's Revisiting Employment Contracts: Helping Under-represented Researchers Develop, Lead and Excel (REC HURDLE) project was created in 2024 as a constructive response to the challenges outlined above. REC HURDLE operates at the individual and institutional level towards a culture supporting diverse backgrounds, needs, skill sets and career paths. It provides support and opportunities for those facing varying forms of precarity, with a focus on staff professional development and the impact of precarity on minoritised groups (**Wellcome, 2023**).

The two-year Wellcome-funded project takes a multi-faceted approach to improving the practice and literature around employment precarity, seeking to change local culture and practice and recommending next steps for both the University of Nottingham and the wider sector with three strands of activity:

- 1) A root-and-branch review of institutional and sector-wide contract use and professional outcomes, followed by a pilot of one or more initiatives to tackle institutional employment precarity;

- 2) An expansion of the Careers & Employability service into supporting research staff with their professional development at an individual level;
- 3) A bespoke professional development programme with additional support and development opportunities for those facing more barriers due to belonging to one or more minoritised or protected groups.

The following section explores and documents the effects and mechanisms of precarious employment. This is followed by detailed learnings from the REC HURDLE project and the Research Precarity Working Group and a section identifying future challenges and strategies to combat precarity in research culture.

Individual Impacts of Precarity

Employment precarity has a vast range of impacts on individuals and creates other interacting forms of precarity (**Solomon & Du Plessis, 2023**). The highly individualised and intersectional nature of precarity is demonstrated below through learnings from REC HURDLE.

Occupational and identity precarity

Short-term contracts limit access to professional development and career progression opportunities (**Solomon & Du Plessis, 2023**). Many training and study opportunities require guaranteed future employment, creating barriers even where continued employment is likely. The power of a principal investigator (PI) or line manager over a precariously employed staff member can prevent individuals accessing development time and funding, despite entitlements under the Researcher Development Concordat (**Solomon & Du Plessis, 2023**). REC HURDLE observed that in some cases, staff report their research fields are small enough for individuals to be well-known nationally, and a poor reputation with a senior academic can taint one's reputation sector wide.

Open-ended employment does not guarantee continued grant income. Universities may avoid permanent employment where future salary costs could fall to institutional funds, with individuals instead moving between FTCs across projects. Arguments can be made when recruiting that the required skillset is specific enough to justify an FTC, negating the automatic switch to permanent employment individuals would typically experience after two years of continuous service. Small breaks between the start and end dates of consecutive contracts can result in the loss of the employment protections provided by continuous service (**Jackson, 2026**).

Academic funding processes discriminate against the precariously employed by design. Many funding opportunities do not allow staff on FTCs to be principal investigator or co-investigator, limiting the autonomy precariously employed individuals have over their research (**Solomon & Du Plessis, 2023**).

Although not yet publicly available, case studies created through the University of Nottingham's Research Leadership in Action Programme document numerous mid-career researchers working on PWUF contracts while acting as line managers or principal investigators for staff on FTCs. This practice creates a conflict of interest between protecting and developing one's team and ensuring one's own continued employment, resulting in stress and disincentivising researchers from facilitating the redeployment of their staff. It is common for staff on PWUF contracts funded by external research grants to also provide teaching and PhD supervision, which should be funded by the university (**UCU, 2019**). This threatens the continuity of support for students if a staff member's research grant is terminated.

In the current economic model of UK academia, while research brings in money, on net, it costs the institution. Teaching posts, however, bring in money and therefore warrant permanent employment. As a result, staff pursuing research careers are forced toward three routes:

- 1) Combine research and teaching in exchange for a permanent contract;
- 2) Pursue a highly competitive, permanent research-only post with additional commitments, leading teams and grants;
- 3) Continue in precarious employment, doing research without additional teaching or management commitments (**Menard & Shinton, 2022**).

Limited progression paths for researchers lead to pipeline bottlenecks at the mid-career research stage. At this level, competition for permanent research-only posts is fierce, and many do not wish to, or have the capacity to, teach or lead a research group. As a result, many individuals, disproportionately from minoritised groups, find themselves forced to leave research.

It is common for skill sets to fall outside of traditional job–family boundaries and for individuals with a combination of research and teaching, professional and technical experience to be contracted in only one of these areas (**UCU, 2019**). As such, professional development and employment opportunities in these other aspects of their career are limited, and individuals can once again end up engaging in 'side-of-desk'

work for the institution, carrying out additional tasks beyond formal job descriptions, for personal career development and to contribute to the organisational culture and community. (UCU, 2019; Towers et al., 2024).

Economic, temporal and welfare precarity

Funding-linked contracts can create employment gaps, resulting in loss of income and benefits linked to continuous service (Kalleberg, 2009). FTCs, and in some cases PWUF contracts, can also prevent individuals from obtaining a mortgage (Coe & Kernohan, 2025). Time off work for poor mental or physical health, or burnout, can lead to loss of income when surpassing organisational sick leave commitments (Kinman & Wray, 2013). Precarious employment limits an individual's ability to plan their career and their finances, which can cause stress and impact personal milestones, such as moving house or having children (Kalleberg, 2009).

Ontological and social precarity

Individuals experiencing employment precarity face a higher workload in the search for new work, increased uncertainty and stress, the associated impacts on mental and physical health, and burnout (Kinman & Wray, 2013; Solomon & Du Plessis, 2023).

Through careers staff, REC HURDLE observed that researchers at the University of Nottingham and elsewhere attended careers appointments in lieu of other services more appropriate for their needs, such as counselling, due to the relative accessibility of the service and availability of appointments. Effective signposting by careers staff supported these individuals in navigating university systems, demonstrating the need for continued careers provision for researchers and equitable access to well-being support.

Intersectional impacts

Structural inequalities lead to systemic increases in the incidence and impact of precarity for minoritised individuals (Sim & Biemera, 2025). Data analysis through REC HURDLE, which will be published separately, sees over-representation on fixed-term contracts at the University of Nottingham for all under-represented groups recognised nationally (age, sex, parental status, caring responsibility, disability, sexuality, gender reassignment, marital status, race, religion or belief) (Equality Act 2010).

Key impacts of precarity on minoritised individuals, as observed through REC HURDLE's bespoke support programme for under-represented research staff, have compounding effects for individuals with intersecting identities, including:

- Increased vulnerability to discrimination and harassment

- Reduced capacity for the additional workload involved in securing future work
- Additional financial and practical commitments including childcare, disability costs and visa fees
- Reduced flexibility of location, working conditions and financial needs, reducing opportunities for networking and loss of involvement in upcoming grants
- Difficulty navigating complex funding and progression structures in UK higher education, known as the 'hidden curriculum'
- Difficulty engaging in full-time work due to disability or caring responsibilities: part-time staff are more likely to be employed on a fixed-term contract (43 percent) than those who are full-time (21 percent) (**HESA, 2023**).

Additionally, participants in REC HURDLE's bespoke professional development programme drew attention to the impact of cultural differences on work life, including miscommunications due to the varying interpretations of body language and eye contact across cultures. Some cultures' relationship to asking for help, respect for authority, or the need for an equal exchange of giving and receiving help can also be at odds with UK cultural expectations for networking within academia and reduce opportunities for individuals to secure their next contract (**Graham & Collins, 2026**).

The 'new precarity'

Across the lifetime of REC HURDLE, a new, alternate form of employment precarity has emerged: the ongoing threat of redundancy. As a result of the cost-of-living crisis, rising organisational energy costs amidst wars in Ukraine and Iran, and reduction in government research spending, many universities are facing deficits which risk their very survival (**Universities UK, 2026; Liu & Lee, 2024**). Many have introduced redundancy schemes, which vary greatly both within and between institutions in terms of transparency, the autonomy of career choices they provide staff members, and their parity across job families (**QMUCU, 2026**).

This type of precarity similarly has psychological and professional impacts on individuals, with under-represented groups at risk of being disproportionately impacted, and financial and research impacts at individual, institutional and sector-wide levels. This 'new precarity' is impacting those on fixed-term, PWUF and permanent contracts alike. In fact, internally funded staff, who are more often permanently employed,

are at greater risk when universities are looking to reduce internal spending.

Institutional impacts

Institutions also face their own burdens from employment precarity. Precarity results in poorer talent retention, organisational short-term thinking, and time lost both at the start of research grants due to recruitment delays and at the end of grants with staff leaving early to begin their next contract (**ARRC, 2024**). This would, in theory, result in reduced grant income and quality and quantity of institutional research outputs and has the potential to impact large-scale research income through institutional performance in the Research Excellence Framework (REF). The impacts of precarity on teaching and supervision provisions could influence student satisfaction league table results and, as such, student fees income. FTCs incur additional human resources costs for recruitment and onboarding and increased costs from sick leave due to stress, sickness and burnout (**Kinman & Wray, 2013; ARRC, 2024**).

Precarity also reduces diversity in the research pipeline due to its impact on minoritised groups and contributes to under-representation of these groups in senior positions. Such diversity is key to organisational wellbeing; intersectionality has been highlighted as an important reflexive tool in combating the culture of precarity in academic institutions (**Sim & Bierema, 2025**).

Precarity and ethics

Further concerns have been raised of the impact of precarity on research ethics. Research journals see a publication bias for conclusive findings (**Fanelli, 2010**), resulting in substantial evidence of researchers consciously or unconsciously misrepresenting their results to increase the likelihood of publication, a behaviour known as ‘p-hacking’ (**Fanelli, 2010**).

Progression to a permanent role requires a strong publication record, creating a financial incentive to publish. It has been theorised that as such, precarious employment increases the likelihood of ‘p-hacking’ in academic research (**Martinson et al., 2005**). This is currently speculation but presents an interesting avenue for future exploration.

Sector-Wide Initiatives to Combat Precarity

Although varying in scale and form based on institution, precarious employment is experienced across the sector. Fortunately, with a national focus on research culture to improve research income through the Research Excellence Framework’s increased interest in people and

environment (REF, 2025), there are many initiatives currently working to combat employment precarity. REC HURDLE benchmarking research identified five key points of activity:

Pooling

These are practices centred around pooling staff resources to distribute according to need. An example is ‘roving researchers’, who cover extended sickness or parental absences or periods where a post is vacant (Coombs, 2024). Schemes which employ ‘staff scientists’, who move flexibly between projects without changes in their permanent contract, exist across several UK universities, although there is no published literature on this to date.

Bridging

These practices involve extending the length of staff employment. This includes ‘bridge funding’ to employ staff between research funding contracts, and ‘continuation funding’, extending staff for a period of weeks or months with no future contract yet in place (UCU, 2023).

HR practices

HR practices to mitigate precarity include improved workforce planning and flexibility. These initiatives may involve dedicating more resources for more creative, agile working practices and less precarious employment conditions. These initiatives differ in approach and scale across institutions.

Contracts

Contractual initiatives support the altering of research employment contracts to combat precarity. Examples include reducing the minimum service period required for permanent employment, increased redundancy payments for staff with over four years of service, and increased restrictions on use of FTCs (UCU, 2023).

Development

Development initiatives are focused on improving the parity and extent of access to professional development support and career progression opportunities (Fisher, 2024; Pain, 2018). For example, the University of Sheffield’s Anti-Ableist Research Culture project allows one day a week for professional development of all staff employed on the project (University of Sheffield, 2026) and the University of York employs a designated PRISMs manager to support professional services research staff with their career development and ensure PRISM roles are appropriately advertised, graded and recruited (University of York, n.d.).

Barriers to Combating Precarity

Reviewing the existing initiatives and the present economic and cultural context at the University of Nottingham, the REC HURDLE project mixed agile contract design and workforce planning in its 'Researcher Transition Support' database. Combining the 'HR planning' and 'pooling' approaches, this pilot provides earlier visibility of upcoming job opportunities and methods for staff to connect with their PIs. Evaluation of this pilot includes data collection designed to support the continued development of institutional initiatives.

Such local initiatives are creating a valuable evidence base and seeing promising results but demonstrate the difficulties involved in effecting lasting change at an institutional scale within the timeframe and budget of current initiatives (**Studio Susegad, 2026**). With increasing cost demands, redundancies that increase workloads for remaining staff, and reductions in the scale and frequency of research culture funding, it is becoming increasingly difficult for universities to provide the resources to carry out lasting change. REC HURDLE found that increasing workloads mean many staff whose principal roles do not include research culture can no longer contribute to institutional research culture activity. Nationwide changes to current processes and policies are required, developed with the broad experiences of individuals in mind, to provide permanent solutions.

Further difficulty in locating and coordinating initiatives in this field has arisen due to variations in terminology. While 'research culture' is a space predominantly occupied by professional services staff, many research staff working on similar topics find themselves in the world of 'metascience', i.e. the study of research itself. This semantic difference reduces opportunities for collaboration across job families, and the transfer of learning from research to practice, and practice to research. Other examples of varying terminology include cross-institutional differences in job–family boundaries and contract types (for example, 'permanent with underlying funding' versus 'open-ended with fixed funding') and various terms used to describe technical and professional staff (e.g., 'research enablers', 'research professionals' and 'PRISMs', i.e. professional research investment and strategy managers).

Such differences in terminology result in a scattered community and missed collaborative opportunities. REC HURDLE's experience of driving policy and cultural change with a varied team demonstrates the value of communication and co-creation between academic and professional staff, opportunities for which are currently limited at a national scale by these semantic divisions. A move towards coordinated collaboration is essential to combat employment precarity.

Current research culture activity demonstrates an increasing appetite for tackling problems in a strategic, evidence-based and people-focused manner. Emergent regional and national research culture networks such as the Research Culture Enablers Network (**Moriarty & Nair, 2024**) and Wellcome's Institutional Research Culture Community (**Towers et al., 2024**) have provided a space for collaboration and have resulted in several targeted action groups. These groups focus on a variety of topics including community engagement with funders, theoretical 'systems thinking' approaches from social change research (**Stroh, 2015**) and political influences within and outside research culture. This environment provides a strong foundation for a coordinated national movement against precarity.

The Research Precarity Working Group

In June 2025, the Research Precarity Working Group (RPWG) was founded for the purpose of taking collective action to reduce the level and impact of employment precarity in research-related careers at higher-education institutions. The group's mission is to make a strong case for national change to current employment practices and improve support for those currently facing employment precarity, including research, professional and technical services staff. Developed with the broad and deeply individualised experiences of precarity in mind, RPWG engages with funders, higher education institutions (HEIs), government organisations, unions and other relevant national organisations supporting academia, calling for systemic changes to research employment processes, with open and collaborative discussion of the forms these could take.

Co-creation and decentralised decision-making were central to the formation of RPWG and are a fundamental practice throughout its ongoing work. For instance, through a collaborative session at the 2025 International Research Culture Conference (IRCC2025), hosted by the University of Warwick, we identified actions necessary to combat research culture precarity, which fall under three main categories:

Data and Evidence

- Collate existing data and evidence, including ongoing initiatives and key contacts across the sector, to assist those carrying out ongoing work on this topic.
- Gather data to fill gaps in current research.
- Found an online evidence bank to collaboratively build a national case for change.

- Provide data, advice and direction for others carrying out work on employment precarity in research.

Organising and Outreach

- Map, liaise with and signpost existing support structures.
- Promote, support and coordinate with regional and national research culture networks and emergent areas of activity relating to precarity.

Making the Ask

- Engage with funders and HEIs to request changes to policies, practices and/or funding processes with the aim of reducing the extent or impact of precarity.
- Have open, frank discussions focused on accountability and collaborative change.
- Increase awareness of employment precarity beyond academic circles.

The foundational work of the RPWG determines the scale of changes we hope to effect and considers the workload, emotional labour and likelihood of success for each. Possible areas for improvement include:

- Sector-wide strengthening of precarity data collection, monitoring and oversight;
- Standardising promotion and progression frameworks, professional development commitments, and parental and sick leave entitlements across institutions and funders;
- Improving recognition of individuals, departments and organisations for research culture work by HEIs and funders.

Two significant evidence gaps have been identified by the working group as important areas for data collection: First, there is little data on the demographic of staff who have left academia and their experiences both inside and outside academia. This data would facilitate targeted support for key demographics identified as likely to leave and appropriate support to meet the needs of those who have already left. Second, due to localised, unstandardised and unmonitored data collection on precarity sector-wide, estimating the cost of precarity to an institution, or indeed to the research ecosystem, is complex. Such data is vital to make a financial case to HEIs, funders and the government that reforming the employment model of academia is required.

Learnings from a Grassroots Movement

In its first year, RPWG has surpassed one hundred members, established a preliminary online evidence bank of precarity-related resources, and produced a roadmap for future engagement with key stakeholders. RPWG has adopted a devolved leadership style, regularly reviewing its approach, to develop a sustainable organisational structure.

Many group members are themselves precariously employed with limited additional workload capacity. This results in untold lost collective knowledge and often requires substantial emotional labour. Group members have described the emotional burden of tackling precarity, leading to regular variations in their optimism for progress. Members noted that an important factor in successfully navigating this burden is prioritising care for oneself and one another.

Reflexive consideration of one's own precarity is also instrumental in understanding how we each can impact and improve the system for those around us (**Sim & Bierema, 2025**). Personal experiences of precarity bring vital understanding of its mechanisms but could impact the objectivity of work in this area. RPWG plans to mitigate this risk by developing a robust and comprehensive evidence base and providing equitable opportunities for co-creation across stakeholder groups.

The business model of higher education currently sees universities spending more on teaching and research than the income these activities generate (**UKRI, 2023**). Universities, on net, frequently lose money from research activities due to rising staff costs and overheads, especially as they are required by many funders to contribute 20 percent of the full economic cost of externally funded grants, e.g., UKRI's dual-support model (**UKRI, 2023**). Due to inflation, the costs of teaching UK-based students now also outweigh income generated from UK student fees (**Universities UK, 2025**). Instead, income is primarily generated from international student fees and commercial endeavours (**UKRI, 2023**), both of which have reduced following fee changes and the cost-of-living crisis (**Universities UK, 2026**). Increases in energy costs have also contributed to the financial deficit, leading many UK universities to reduce staff costs (**Martin, 2026**).

Under the current funding model, many universities face structural financial pressures while performing their primary function; hence, there is a natural argument to be made that the commercial model of the university is inherently unsustainable (**Universities UK, 2026**). HEIs face a leaky career pipeline, and with it the loss of diversity, knowledge and experience, while simultaneously needing to increase profits. This exposes a significant risk to the UK's research ecosystem and provides a strong case for government involvement and significant sector-wide reforms.

Conclusion

The REC HURDLE project has demonstrated both the efficacy and the limitations of institutional initiatives in lessening the extent and impact of precarity at an individual and institutional level. REC HURDLE has benefitted greatly from strong cross-departmental cooperation and the support of ‘allies’ working in equality, diversity and inclusion (EDI), research culture and leadership roles across the university. The project would not have been possible without external funding, and while the activities of REC HURDLE have led to lasting changes to university provisions and processes, not all initiatives created by the project will continue. A more sustainable model of research culture funding is required within HEIs, with greater efforts needed from universities to dedicate internal funding to research culture activity and to permanently employ research culture staff. There is also a need for funders to prioritise calls for research culture projects, in order to sustain the current level of research activity and support UK research culture’s precarious community.

The establishment of the Research Precarity Working Group builds on decades of data collection, research culture and policy change initiatives on precarity and aims to provide a foundation for future progress. While RPWG will not eliminate employment precarity alone, it aims to demonstrate that meaningful institutional and sector-wide change is achievable and document it when it occurs. Widespread and collective action is essential for lasting change in this area and requires those within the research ecosystem to be reflexive in their coordination efforts, spreading awareness within and beyond the sector while prioritising self-care and care for each another along the way.

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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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Using the Cultural Web Model to Analyse Early-Career Research Culture

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Abstract

This Critical Reflection explores how Johnson and Scholes' 'Cultural Web' organisational model can be used to interrogate institutional research culture, with a particular focus on whether the needs and experiences of early-career researchers (ECRs) are as culturally complex as institutional discourse may imply. Drawing on engagement with over 200 ECRs across four UK universities and reflections from presentations at the 2025 International Research Culture Conference held at the University of Warwick, the paper explores the following question: Which aspects of institutional research culture impacting on the lived experiences of early-career researchers are genuinely complex, deeply embedded and resistant to change and which reflect tensions between well-understood researcher needs and established institutional priorities? It argues that ECR aspirations are largely straightforward and uncomplicated. The issue may lie in how these aspirations interact with institutional paradigms, power arrangements, reward systems and resource constraints. The paper is intended as a call to action, using the Cultural Web model to make visible the relationship between an institution's stated cultural ambitions and its organisational mechanisms through which particular research cultures are reproduced. In doing so, it argues for a more precise use of the language of complexity and for greater attention to the institutional choices and tensions that shape research culture and researchers' day-to-day experience.

Keywords: Johnson & Scholes; Cultural Web; research culture; Research Excellence Framework; REF; organisational culture

Introduction: Research culture and the ‘Cultural Web’

The description and measurement of research culture continues to represent a key concern within higher education policy, institutional strategy, and academic discourse. Moran et al. (2020) describe ‘research culture’ as a multidimensional space in which researchers hold divergent, and sometimes incompatible, views shaped by multiple factors, including a potential disconnect between institutional strategy or policy and day-to-day experience. Institutional research cultures may be contested because different groups (e.g., late-, mid-, or early-career researchers) can hold differing views about what a positive culture should look and feel like (Moran et al., 2020).

At the 2025 International Research Culture Conference (IRCC25), held at the University of Warwick, discussions informing this critical reflection repeatedly described research culture(s) as complex, deeply embedded and resistant to change. That description has merit as research environments often involve multiple disciplines, roles, incentives and external pressures. However, treating complexity as a general explanation for slow progress can blur an important distinction between, on the one hand, genuinely difficult issues, and, on the other hand, cultural problems whose causes and potential remedies are already reasonably well understood. The central provocation of this paper is therefore not that research cultures are simple, but that the label ‘complex’ should be interrogated rather than accepted as a sufficient explanation for inaction.

Drawing on workshops and author engagement with over two hundred early-career researchers (ECRs) across four UK universities, as well as conversations held at IRCC25, this paper argues that there are areas within the research culture landscape that do not exemplify the degree of complexity often attributed to them. This is particularly apparent in ECR accounts of the conditions they need to thrive. If ECRs’ needs are generally coherent and recognisable, then barriers to improving early-career research culture may arise not from complexity but from other factors, including tensions with long-standing institutional norms, hierarchies, performance metrics, resource models and managerial priorities.

To explore this tension, this paper adopts the Johnson and Scholes model of the ‘Cultural Web’. Originally published by Johnson (1988) and later made popular by Scholes et al. (2002), Johnson and Scholes’ Cultural Web provides a structured means of examining the taken-for-granted assumptions that shape strategy, behaviour and decision-making. According to the Cultural Web model, an organisation’s cultural paradigm is reproduced through six inter-related organisational mechanisms or ‘elements’: stories, symbols, rituals and routines, power structures, organisational structures and controls (Table 1). For Johnson (1988), this

paradigm represents the ‘core set of beliefs and assumptions that fashion an organisation’s view of itself and its environment; surfacing that which is taken for granted’.

Table 1: Cultural Web elements (Scholes et al., 2002)

Element of the Web	Description
The Stories People Tell	The narratives that people share about past events, individuals and successes that signal what the organisation values and considers important
Rituals and Routines	The established ways of working and repeated behaviours that demonstrate what is expected and considered acceptable
Symbols	The visible signs of culture, including language and physical or organisational artefacts that convey meaning about what is valued
Power Structures	The individuals or groups with the greatest influence over decisions, priorities and resources, whether through formal authority or informal influence
Organisational structures	The formal and informal arrangements, roles, hierarchies and relationships that shape how work is organised and how people interact
Control Systems	The measures, incentives, performance processes and reward mechanisms that reinforce which behaviours and outcomes are valued

While developed primarily as a tool for understanding organisational strategy and change, the Cultural Web’s emphasis on both visible practices and less explicit assumptions makes it particularly applicable for an analysis of research culture in higher-education institutions (HEIs) in order to move beyond abstract calls for cultural change and towards a more grounded critique of how research cultures are actively reproduced and could be meaningfully reshaped. Interventions such as revised promotion criteria, training programmes and wellbeing initiatives can be valuable, but the Cultural Web directs attention to whether such interventions are reinforced by the wider organisational paradigm, routines, power structures and control systems (Scholes, et al., 2002). Where these

elements remain misaligned, formal initiatives may have limited effect on researchers' lived experiences.

Data used to support the conclusions of this reflection come primarily from consultancy work with four UK universities who were each seeking recommended actions to improve the lived experience of their early-career researchers. Data was collected via a series of cross-disciplinary workshops featuring more than two hundred ECRs, primarily postdoctoral researchers. Using questions framed around the six elements of the Cultural Web, the workshops explored the current ('as-is') experience of ECRs and what a successful research culture would look like. Across all four universities, researchers described gaps between formal aspirations and lived experience and the importance of support, recognition, career development, networking and day-to-day working conditions. In all workshops participants detailed positive experiences as uneven and dependent on local teams or individual supervisors. These observations suggest that informal practices can shape a particular institutional research culture as powerfully as formal policy.

Research Culture through the Lens of the Cultural Web

Johnson (1988) emphasises that by making the six elements of organisational culture explicit, organisational culture can be challenged and changed. In academic research environments specifically, reward and control systems are influenced by factors such as funding, performance measures and professional norms; power is distributed through formal roles and informal influence; and routines signal which activities are genuinely prioritised. The analytical task of the Cultural Web is to examine how these mechanisms combine, rather than to assume that any single interest or system explains their cultural persistence (Johnson, 1988; Scholes et al., 2002).

From the perspective adopted here, research-culture change is consequently both a cultural and a governance challenge. Measurement frameworks and cultural audits can support diagnosis, but they do not by themselves resolve questions about priorities, accountability or trade-offs. Addressing issues such as hyper-competition, precarious employment or inequitable recognition can require difficult choices related to resources, incentives, workload and authority which impact on the lived experiences of ECRs. Some tensions between researchers and research institutions may be genuinely difficult to reconcile. For example, ECRs may seek security, autonomy and broader recognition while institutions operate within short-term funding arrangements and performance systems that reward flexibility and measurable outputs. The issue is therefore not

simply whether institutions ‘understand’ research culture, but how they govern and negotiate these competing priorities.

Applied to academic research, the Cultural Web enables systematic examination of how a particular research culture is enacted and sustained. For example, stories about academic success may privilege grant income, publication volume and institutional prestige; promotion rounds, peer review processes and workload models can reinforce these signals; and formal and informal power structures shape whose voices influence research priorities and resource allocation. Taken together, such patterns might point to a central paradigm in which research excellence is assumed to be demonstrated primarily through competitive achievement, measurable outputs and reputation. The value of the Cultural Web framework lies in examining whether the six elements of the web consistently reinforce such assumptions or whether they pull in different directions (Scholes et al., 2002). The Cultural Web therefore provides a practical way to compare espoused intentions with enacted organisational practice and impact. (In this context, ‘impact’ means the lived consequences of policies and cultural initiatives for researchers rather than simply whether an initiative has been implemented.)

The framework does not eliminate the complexity of institutional research culture, nor does this paper seek to redefine research culture as a straightforward concept. Instead, it seeks to distinguish between different sources of complexity and identify areas—such as the articulated needs of ECRs—where the cultural requirements may be comparatively clear even when implementation remains difficult. By adopting the Cultural Web as a central analytical device, it suggests that research cultures can be described in simpler terms, thus seeking to counter those narratives that present the institutional inability to improve research culture as resulting from its inherent complexity.

IRCC2025 Narratives on Research Culture

IRCC2025 offered a rich snapshot of contemporary thinking on research culture in the higher-education sector. Across the conference, presentations, panels and facilitated discussions repeatedly presented research culture as complex and multifaceted. Presenters emphasised inclusion, collaboration, wellbeing, ethical practice, psychological safety, leadership behaviour and open dialogue as core components of a healthy research environment. One of the strongest metaphors used to describe research culture compared it to a Rubik’s cube: difficult, multi-dimensional, but ultimately solvable.

While such metaphors serve an important communicative function, they also risk reinforcing the idea that research culture is inherently convoluted and therefore resistant to decisive intervention. The framing of research culture as a tangled or multi-layered problem may unintentionally normalise inertia. Notably absent from many of the discussions was sustained interrogation of *why* certain cultural patterns persist despite widespread recognition of their negative impact. Issues such as research precarity, inequitable recognition and hyper-competition were acknowledged yet rarely framed as outcomes of specific institutional choices or power arrangements that should be challenged.

One of the most striking features of the conference discourse was the near-universal emphasis on psychological safety as the cornerstone of a positive research culture. Across multiple sessions, psychological safety was positioned as enabling open dialogue, inclusion of diverse voices, mentoring, innovation and the surfacing of systemic barriers. However, while it was consistently presented as essential, there was comparatively little discussion of the structural conditions that may undermine it, including power asymmetries, performance regimes, funding dependencies and employment insecurity. Framed through the Cultural Web, psychological safety can be understood as both an aspiration and a visible symbol of the desired culture; yet it may struggle to become routine if control systems, power structures and dominant success narratives pull in a different direction. This raises an important critical question: Can psychological safety be cultivated consistently without also examining the paradigms governing reward, risk and reputation in academic life? The conference discourse was strongly aspirational, but a Cultural Web reading suggests that the relationship between psychological safety and structural conditions warrants deeper interrogation.

Leadership behaviour emerged as another dominant theme, with presenters emphasising that cultural change depends less on formal strategies and more on how leaders act day-to-day. Authenticity, consistency and visible support were repeatedly cited as critical, alongside calls for open and continuous dialogue with research communities. However, this framing tended to individualise responsibility for cultural change. The emphasis on how leaders behave can obscure the extent to which leaders are themselves embedded within institutional paradigms and incentive systems. Leadership agency matters, but so too does the role leaders play in maintaining or challenging promotion criteria, resource allocation practices and accepted ways of working.

Similarly, persistent dialogue and engagement were framed as inherently transformative, with phrases such as ‘just keep talking’ suggesting that cultural change will emerge organically through conversation. While

dialogue is undeniably important, without mechanisms that translate it into structural change, it risks becoming performative, another ritual within the Cultural Web of the institution that signals openness while leaving underlying assumptions intact.

A further recurring narrative positioned research culture as moving away from output-driven models towards a more holistic, human-centred approach. Contributors emphasised valuing diverse forms of research activity, recognising invisible labour and focusing on societal impact rather than narrow quantitative metrics. This rhetoric sits in tension with the continued prominence of metrics-driven systems within higher education. From a Cultural Web perspective, that tension may indicate a misalignment between espoused values and existing control systems. At the conference it was more often treated as a transitional challenge than explored as a possible conflict between underlying paradigms, perhaps reflecting the practical difficulty of reconciling human-centred aspirations with established funding and performance arrangements.

Taken collectively, the conference narratives reveal a research culture that is highly articulate about the many features that define it positively, yet less so about the institutional assumptions and issues that may sustain less-desirable research practices. The discourse also shows a reluctance to connect acknowledged problems consistently to power arrangements, reward systems and organisational choices through which particular research cultures are reproduced. This analysis suggests that presenting research cultures as inherently complex can function as a discursive shield even without conscious intent, allowing institutions to acknowledge problems while leaving their origins, trade-offs and consequences insufficiently examined. The Cultural Web provides a useful framework for moving from description towards interrogation of the mechanisms through which culture is reproduced.

Early-Career Researchers' Articulated Needs

In conference discussions, research culture was repeatedly described as diffuse, multi-faceted and resistant to change. The cross-disciplinary workshops held for more than two hundred early-career researchers at four UK universities offer a useful counterpoint, not because they demonstrate that research culture as a whole is simple, but because they show that one important part of the landscape can be comparatively coherent. Throughout these workshops, ECRs expressed strikingly similar views about the conditions they need in order to thrive, articulating remarkably consistent aspirations across disciplines and different academic roles and circumstances. These included financial security,

protected time for research and professional development, transparent pathways to progression, access to mentoring and networks and recognition as individuals rather than interchangeable units of labour. While their longer-term goals varied from academic careers to industry, entrepreneurship or portfolio careers, the cultural conditions they associated with positive experience were broadly shared.

This consistency is significant given the diversity of perspectives identified. Some participants viewed their current role as a stepping stone to academic tenure; others described research as a way of life. Some anticipated careers beyond academia, while others envisaged niche or hybrid careers with research as a backbone. Despite these differences, their core needs converged around a small number of foundational conditions: security, respect, autonomy, clarity and belonging.

This convergence cannot and should not be generalised to research culture in its entirety. However, it does suggest that ECR expectations regarding a positive research culture are more coherent and straightforward than the language of ‘complex and multifaceted’ may imply. The complexity may arise at the point where ECR expectations meet other institutional and sector priorities—for example, where demands for security, autonomy or broad recognition conflict with short-term funding, workload pressures or output-based performance systems. In this sense, the question shifts from ‘What do ECRs need?’ to ‘What tensions prevent ECR needs from being delivered consistently?’

One of the most telling findings from these ECR workshops was the repeated use of the word ‘luck’ when participants described positive research culture experiences. Supportive supervisors, manageable workloads, access to development opportunities and flexible working arrangements were framed as fortunate exceptions rather than dependable features of the research environment. I refer to this pattern as ‘cultural inconsistency’, where comparable researchers can experience markedly different cultural norms, support and opportunities depending on local teams, supervisors or circumstances even within the same institutional setting.

Through the Cultural Web model, ‘luck’ can be interpreted as a story that helps normalise this variability. If positive experience is narrated as the result of encountering the ‘right’ supervisor or team, responsibility can shift away from institutional systems towards individual circumstance. The engagement carried out with early-career researchers indicated that examples of positive research culture did exist but were localised rather than consistently embedded through elements of the Cultural Web such as shared routines or control systems. The prevalence of the ‘luck’ narrative matters because it shows that participants could recognise and

describe good research culture when they encountered it. The problem was not an inability to identify positive practice, but its uneven availability. As such, the use of 'luck' leads to a consideration of why recognised good practice has not been made more predictable, portable and institutionally supported.

Likewise, ECRs consistently identified a small number of structural stressors as inhibitors of a positive research culture: precarious employment, unrealistic workload expectations, opaque progression criteria and limited autonomy over research direction. Participants linked these factors to stress, reduced wellbeing and constrained creativity. These are not culturally mysterious phenomena; they relate to organisational choices and external constraints concerning funding, employment contracts, workload and performance measurement. This is also where genuine complexity may reside; ECR aspirations for security, autonomy and recognition can conflict with institutional needs for financial flexibility, competitive performance and short-term delivery. Recognising that tension is more analytically useful than treating 'complexity' as an undifferentiated characteristic of research culture.

A further theme emerging from engagement with ECRs was the desire for recognition beyond narrow research outputs. ECRs expressed frustration that contributions such as mentoring, teaching innovation, interdisciplinary collaboration, equality and inclusion work and public engagement were routinely undervalued despite being celebrated rhetorically in institutional strategies. Where symbols and formal narratives may celebrate mentoring, collaboration, inclusion and public engagement, systems of control continue to reward a narrower set of measurable outputs. The resulting inconsistency is diagnostically useful: it identifies where cultural aspirations are not yet reinforced by the systems that allocate recognition, resources or progression. The misalignment between espoused values and enacted reward systems can be examined directly through the paradigm of the Cultural Web (Table 2).

Perhaps the most powerful challenge to the 'too complex' narrative lies in the articulation of a credible alternative paradigm. ECRs were able to describe in concrete terms what positive research culture would look like: shared spaces for collaboration, supportive leadership behaviours, streamlined processes, family-friendly practices and rituals that reinforce belonging and mutual support. These descriptions were not speculative; rather, they built on existing pockets of good practice already operating within institutions. Their partial and uneven implementation further undermines claims of impossibility. If elements of a positive research culture already exist, the question becomes not whether culture can be changed, but why it has not been systematised.

Table 2: Research culture needs described by ECRs, mapped to Johnson & Scholes' Cultural Web model

Element	ECR needs
The Paradigm (the 'way we do things around here')	- To feel valued as individuals, not as 'resources' or 'outputs' - To be recognised as legitimate researchers in their own right - To experience research as sustainable, meaningful and human-centred - To believe that multiple career pathways are valid and respected
The Stories People Tell (what the organisation/ individuals choose to talk about)	- Transparent narratives about career progression and expectations - Honest accounts of failure, experimentation, and 'non-linear' careers - Recognition of diverse contributions - Removal of 'luck' as the dominant explanatory story
Rituals and Routines (how things are done day to day)	- Protected time for research, development and networking - Regular mentoring and peer-support forums - Consistent induction and transition support - Predictable access to training and collaboration opportunities
Symbols (visible signals of what is valued)	- Dedicated collaborative spaces and shared infrastructure - Visible investment in ECR development - Recognition that does not privilege seniority alone - Physical and digital environments that foster belonging
Power Structures (who really makes decisions)	- A voice in decisions affecting research priorities and culture - Reduced dependency on single Principal Investigators - Safe mechanisms to challenge poor behaviour - Transparent governance processes
Organisational Structures (formal roles and reporting lines)	- Clear career pathways and role definitions - Alignment between research, teaching and service expectations - Reduced fragmentation between faculties and disciplines - Structures that enable mobility and collaboration
Control Systems (what is measured, rewarded and sanctioned)	- Fair workload allocation - Recognition of diverse contributions - Transparent progression criteria - Reduced over-reliance on narrow metrics - Call-out of negative behaviours irrespective of where these exist

Conclusion

Reframed through the Cultural Web, the question at the heart of this paper therefore becomes more precise. While the evidence does *not* show that research culture as a whole is straight-forward, it *does* show that ECR needs can be articulated with considerable clarity. Meeting those needs, however, is complicated by institutional paradigms: the challenge here is to distinguish complexity that genuinely requires new forms of problem-solving and negotiation from complexity invoked as a smokescreen for a lack of commitment to addressing well-understood cultural problems.

A persistent theme in the IRCC2025 discourse was that research culture is multi-faceted and difficult to change. Mapping the ECR needs identified here onto the Cultural Web model produces a more differentiated picture.

While it does not prove that improving research culture is a simple task, it does demonstrate that ECR expectations can be organised around a clear set of cultural levers. When mapped systematically, the ECR needs identified align with each element of the Cultural Web. This provides a proof of concept for the framework as a diagnostic device, translating experience into identifiable questions about paradigms, stories, routines, symbols, power, structures and controls (Johnson, 1988; Scholes et al., 2002).

The implication is not that problematic research cultures can be attributed solely to institutional reluctance. Some tensions are structural and genuinely difficult, particularly where researcher aspirations conflict with funding models, performance regimes or resource constraints. However, the mapping makes those tensions more explicit and therefore more open to governance, prioritisation and deliberate choice. Complexity becomes something to specify and examine, rather than a catch-all explanation.

The desired conditions for research culture described by ECRs are comparatively legible: security, respect, autonomy, clarity, recognition and belonging. The central challenge is whether institutions can align the elements of the Cultural Web sufficiently to make those conditions consistent rather than contingent on local circumstance or 'luck'. The value of the Cultural Web is therefore not that it simplifies research culture, but that it helps identify where cultural aspirations, institutional paradigms and organisational systems reinforce or contradict one another.

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The Interdisciplinary Condition: Navigating precarity, identity and epistemic translation as an early-career researcher

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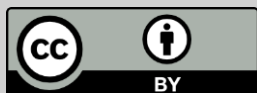
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Abstract

Early-career researchers (ECRs) increasingly navigate interdisciplinary landscapes, where addressing complex societal problems requires crossing disciplinary boundaries before fully consolidating a scholarly and professional identity. Drawing on my experiences as an ECR in Applied Linguistics, which include engaging in research-informed teaching, mentoring, and collaborative projects across computer science, chemistry, medical education, AI, and mental health, this article critically reflects on the practices, challenges, and opportunities of interdisciplinarity facing ECRs. These include negotiating identity as a disciplinary 'outsider', performing epistemological translation across differing research cultures, and managing the relational and cognitive labour of boundary-spanning. While such work can exacerbate precarity and divert focus from core disciplinary expertise, it also cultivates linguistic agility, epistemic humility, relational intelligence, and integrative problem-solving, the competencies of what I term 'interdisciplinary expertise'. Supporting ECRs requires institutional structures that value cross-boundary contributions, provide longer-term stability, foster recognition and inclusive practices, and strengthen mentorship networks. By reframing interdisciplinarity as a site for cultivating adaptability, leadership, and integrative thinking, institutions can empower researchers to thrive as confident, future-ready scholars.

Keywords: early-career researchers; ECRs; interdisciplinary studies; interdisciplinary research; research culture; research precarity

Introduction: ECRs in an Interdisciplinary Research Landscape

In today's academia, interdisciplinarity has recently come to be perceived not merely as a trendy scholarly approach but sometimes even as a moral responsibility to define what competent researchers and quality research is. Interdisciplinary research is often framed as the most viable response to complex real-world problems, such as AI ethics, climate change, and mental health, as well as the most effective way to produce new knowledge outcomes (**Earnshaw 2020**). Funding calls, strategic development and educational plans, and institutional and governmental mission statements often promote and even require cross-disciplinary and interdisciplinary collaboration, framing it as both a virtue and a necessity (**Graff 2015; Leahey & Barringer 2020**).

In this context, staying strictly within one's own disciplinary boundaries may be perceived as short-sighted, indicative of a limited capacity and knowledge, as well as an outdated approach to problem-solving in the current research landscape. This shift extends beyond ways of knowing or studying the world. Especially for early-career researchers (ECRs), it can also affect their position within the transforming academic landscape by way of the perception of their academic value and how it fits within the current research ecosystem (**Spence et al., 2024**).

While interdisciplinarity can offer new opportunities to solve pressing societal challenges, it may also introduce uncertainty regarding career stability, funding prospects, and professional recognition (**van Helden et al., 2024; Vantard et al., 2023**). ECRs, whose nascent academic careers are already precarious, now have to navigate a delicate balance between pursuing innovative, cross-disciplinary research and meeting the practical demands and expectations of institutions organised around traditional disciplinary norms and supports (**Shellock et al., 2023**).

Locating the Self: The Identity Work of Interdisciplinary ECRs

As an ECR with a research background in Applied Linguistics, I have spent my early career not following a linear progression. Rather, my career has developed through my ongoing engagement across multiple disciplines, through interdisciplinary research and research-informed teaching outside my home department. I have contributed to intercultural teamwork, project management, and research communication in Chemistry and Computer Science, and supported interprofessional communication practice in the University of Warwick Medical School. In

each context, I brought my expertise in language and social interaction, as well as perspectives inspired by the social sciences to enrich scholarly discussions in learning spaces. While I do not fully 'belong' to any single disciplinary domain, the value of my research lies in drawing on the fresh perspectives generated by the differences between and intersection of my own disciplines and these other fields, and in my ability to make visible what disciplinary insiders might not readily perceive in their own ways of working, communicating, and researching. Throughout my interdisciplinary research and related teaching journey, I have come to realise that no single discipline can claim epistemic authority, given that contemporary real-world problems require a broad range of knowledge and problem-solving skills from various subject areas.

For instance, my home discipline of Applied Linguistics does not treat language as an isolated structure. Instead, it examines how language both shapes and is shaped by social realities, institutional power, and lived identities (**Schmitt & Celce-Murcia, 2020**). This foundation has given me a distinctive lens through which I interrogate a complex world. I do not only observe human or digitalised communication; I analyse the discourse underpinning it. Likewise, I do not only describe or record the transfer of information; I examine how meaning is produced, circulated, consumed, and interpreted; how positions are negotiated; and how authority is enacted or dissolved through that transfer. In interdisciplinary collaborations, this granular and critical perspective allows me to perceive what often remains nascent, including the assumptions embedded in terminology, the hierarchies encoded in professional genres, and the values reflected in routine practices.

Applied Linguistics carries its own epistemic culture, just as every discipline does. Taking reflexivity practice as an example, as an applied linguist, I am trained to regard researchers as participants not neutral observers, to view knowledge as always socially situated, and to appreciate that knowledge production is facilitated by human beings and their subjectivities (**Consoli & Ganassin, 2023**). When I entered a science and medicine context, I encountered a very different approach to knowledge, one that urges objectivity. In these spaces, credibility is usually measured by quantification, by numeric data. Research is considered rigorous only if the researcher remains distant from those being studied, and language is treated as solely an instrument for conveying information rather than being recognised as a mediational tool that shapes how we understand the world.

This contrast in approach created methodological challenges and moments of self-reflection. As an ECR making forays into multiple disciplines, I constantly had to translate across epistemic differences, justifying why my qualitative inquiry is rigorous, why reflexivity is essential, and why discourse analysis is diagnostic rather than descriptive. For example, when developing a research-informed case study on patient safety for medical students, the project lead required me to specify that examining communication in a simulated medical case discussion is not a distraction from clinical competence but is actually a core skill in professional practice that reveals how empathy, hierarchy, and uncertainty are organised through language.

These moments spurred me to become more confident and assertive in my research and to critique constructively. They also highlighted the invisible labour of interdisciplinary ECRs like me, for whom research 'legitimacy' still has to be earned and then continually reaffirmed in every collaboration outside one's disciplinary comfort zone (Apine et al., 2026). This labour appears in project meetings where research questions are reframed to travel across fields, in grant applications where qualitative insight has to be translated into impact, and in classrooms where assumptions about neutrality are gently unsettled. Although challenging, this work has strengthened my commitments and deepened my respect for epistemic diversity. Rooted in Applied Linguistics, I have carried its reflexive ethos into new contexts, insisting that *how* we know cannot be separated from *what* we know and how we are different, and that meaningful interdisciplinary collaboration begins with making epistemological conflicts visible and acknowledged (Dalton et al., 2022).

Boundary-spanning as Practice and Precarity: STEM, AI, Medicine and the Labour of Integration

My research-informed work across Chemistry, Computer Science, and Medical Education has unfolded as a continuous journey between fields, translating knowledge and helping others navigate interdisciplinary spaces. At first glance, these areas might seem very different, but they share a common tension: balancing human complexity and technical precision. With each, I confronted the same fundamental challenge: what happens when disciplines built on claims of objectivity encounter the vast, messy human realities of meaning, interpretation, and collaboration?

In Chemistry, I worked as an interdisciplinary research project mentor. My role involved guiding undergraduate teams on interdisciplinary projects,

supporting research writing, presentation skills, and public engagement, as well as offering one-on-one tutorials on project development and design. My mentoring work, in practice, involved constantly translating research between disparate disciplinary research cultures. For instance, many chemists were trained to use statistical methods to uncover truths about the world, treating numbers and formulas as objective reflections of reality. But at the same time, I tutored student groups who were conducting qualitative research and often struggled to recognise what counts as 'valid' in this context, which methods to prioritise, how to apply qualitative approaches appropriately, and how knowledge is socially constructed. By encouraging students to reflect on moments of uncertainty in shifting research paradigms, interpretive decisions, and the reasoning behind their analytical choices, I created a space to make visible the human work behind scientific inquiry. This was not about undermining the rigour or questioning the validity of their common scientific inquiries. Rather, it was about recognising that human agency—our decisions, interpretations, and interventions—can enable us to dig into the deeper layers of meaning that often remain hidden in quantitative methods.

In Computer Science, I was able to bring questions from my research on AI, language, and social interaction into a different disciplinary setting. For example, I developed a research-informed case study on the ethical implications of conversational AI in medical consultations. Asking questions such as 'whose language is being marginalised?' or 'who benefits from these systems?' helped shift the conversation from technical correctness to broader social implications, bringing questions from my research on language, inequality, and AI into a more technically focused discipline. This experience required me to explain ideas from my research in ways that connected with a different field and made me reflect on how different disciplines approach questions of language, ethics, and social justice. It also showed me how interdisciplinary research can bring different perspectives together to explore shared problems.

My work in Medical Education offered a different opportunity to apply my research on communication and interaction. In simulated interprofessional communication exercises, I focused on how people use interaction to establish expertise, build trust, express uncertainty, and manage professional identities. I encouraged students to consider who speaks, whose concerns are prioritised, and how uncertainty and emotion are handled in conversation. This work helped me see how research on interaction can shed light on professional practice, while also highlighting the contribution that qualitative approaches can make to research

cultures where biomedical and technical forms of knowledge have traditionally been more prominent.

Across various disciplines, I noticed a clear pattern in my work. By spanning boundaries, all of these experiences in interdisciplinary research make visible what each individual discipline often takes for granted (**Wagner et al., 2011**). The production of new and novel knowledge does not come from everyone simply agreeing on the same assumptions or ways of seeing a problem (**Stoffels et al., 2022**). It often arises when differences between disciplines and perspectives require researchers to explain their assumptions, reflect on their own positions, and engage in dialogue with one another. As an ECR who moves between different disciplines, I felt this firsthand. My interdisciplinarity means I am often valued for my outside perspective but am rarely fully included in any single community. The work of translating knowledge, anticipating scepticism regarding my credentials, and carefully framing critique can be tiring.

Interdisciplinary work is relational as much as it is intellectual. I spend a lot of time building trust, mediating misunderstandings, and smoothing tensions through meetings, emails, and casual conversations, so that all my interdisciplinary 'voices' can be heard. Without a clear home for my research, I sometimes felt like an outsider. My contributions are not always fully understood, and moments of self-doubt are common. At the same time, I know this work is deeply useful and meaningful. Moving across boundaries forces me to think differently, to question assumptions, and to support others in doing the same.

Nonetheless, boundary-spanning is not just about navigating academic boundaries. Instead, it is a form of leadership by example. Complex problems require people who can see how data, technology, human behaviour, and experience interact. Doing this work has taught me that being a boundary-spanner is not about being a critic from the sidelines. It is about acting as a catalyst, helping others see things anew, inviting reflection, and expanding what counts as legitimate knowledge.

Epistemological Translation, Power and the Making of Interdisciplinary Expertise

Another central theme of my experience in the interdisciplinary space has been the uneven power dynamics that shape who gets to define what counts as such valid and useful knowledge. Interdisciplinary work is often described as democratic and collaborative, yet in practice it is a

negotiation shaped by epistemic hierarchies (Cullen et al., 2023). Terms such as *rigour*, *impact*, and *evidence* can take on different meanings and expectations even within the same institution. What is regarded as credible and foundational in one discipline may be viewed as peripheral, or even inconsequential, in another.

I became aware of this when I joined a mental health intervention project during my PhD study, at a time when I had no formal training in health sciences. Although I had been recruited because of my expertise in language, peer interaction, and communication, I often felt out of place in early project meetings. I questioned whether my ideas were legitimate, and I hesitated to speak up. I interpreted unfamiliarity with health terminology as incompetence rather than as a natural condition of interdisciplinary work. Eventually, I understood that the uncertainty I felt was not only about myself; it expressed my discomfort with deeper disciplinary hierarchies and asymmetries. While the health-related knowledge of my peers spoke with ontological and epistemological authority, my linguistic and qualitative insights were suspect. Without intentional effort, interdisciplinary environments risk reproducing these hierarchies, marginalising those instrumental to research outcomes who are positioned outside the dominant field.

What transformed my experience for the better was not my gaining more health and medical knowledge, but the changes made in leadership practice in this interdisciplinary space (Feldman et al., 2006; Resendiz et al., 2026). Senior colleagues intentionally invited my input, treated my questions as intellectually valuable, and acknowledged the broader relevance of my research skills and expertise. Importantly, they involved me in decision-making instead of confining me to a narrow, technical and administrative role. This shift disrupted the implicit hierarchy that had made my contributions feel peripheral, allowing me to recognise that my role was not supplementary but integral (Borrego & Newswander, 2010).

Since then, I have come to understand much of my interdisciplinary work as a process of epistemological translation (Klein, 2010). This kind of translation is not a matter of simplifying or diluting ideas. Instead, it is a deliberate act of reframing concepts so that their significance is visible and meaningful to collaborators operating from different disciplinary perspectives. To be able to confidently, competently, and comfortably translate between epistemological domains requires three interdependent capacities:

- 1) *linguistic agility*: the skill to switch between the languages of different disciplines without changing the core meaning of ideas;
- 2) *epistemic humility*: the ability to recognise that your own disciplinary perspective is limited and to approach other ways of knowing with curiosity instead of defensiveness;
- 3) *purposeful simplification*: knowing when to simplify a complex idea so it is clear to others, and when to keep its complexity to avoid misrepresenting it.

Moreover, this experience is about relationships as much as it is about ideas. Successful translation between disciplines requires an environment where people from different fields feel safe to share their perspectives. Without careful attention to power dynamics, interdisciplinary work can become superficial, consisting of parallel conversations rather than true integration.

Building on Cooke (2024), Haider et al. (2018), and Mennes (2025), I describe this practice more broadly as *interdisciplinary expertise* (IE). IE is composed of three key competencies:

- 1) *boundary-crossing capability*: the skill to enter new fields, understand their core values, and contribute meaningfully even within limited timeframes;
- 2) *epistemic synthesis*: the ability to combine insights from different domains, such as AI ethics and Applied Linguistics, to create new understanding;
- 3) *relational intelligence*: the interpersonal and collaborative skills needed to support interdisciplinary teams, including negotiating tensions and translating ideas across differing expectations.

Viewed this way, epistemological translation becomes a core part of interdisciplinary expertise. From my experience working across Chemistry, Computer Science, and Medical Education, I have learned that questioning assumptions, reframing ideas, and adopting different perspectives are not peripheral tasks. Instead, they are the very processes and mechanisms that make the creation of new knowledge possible.

Conclusion: Interdisciplinarity and Institutional Responsibility

Over time, I have come to understand the challenges of interdisciplinary research as interconnected and shaped by institutional structures and

cultures. Universities frequently endorse interdisciplinarity in strategic language, and I have benefited from these commitments. Yet in everyday practice, the communicative and relational labour that enables interdisciplinary collaboration often remains under-recognised.

Much of the formal training I have undertaken has focused on funding mechanisms, collaboration models, and project design. These structural dimensions are important and necessary. However, they rarely address the subtle dynamics that shape interdisciplinary interaction in practice. Questions of whose discipline 'speaks' first, whose terminology frames the discussion, and whose definition of rigour becomes normative are seldom made explicit. Authority is unevenly distributed across disciplines, and assumptions about what constitutes legitimate knowledge often remain implicit. For scholars positioned outside the dominant field, these dynamics can generate uncertainty about belonging and credibility. The consequence is not only personal self-doubt but also the potential narrowing of intellectual exchange.

These experiences have led me to reflect on how IE is valued. Traditional academic models tend to prioritise depth within a single disciplinary domain. By contrast, many contemporary research problems require integrative thinking, conceptual synthesis, and relational awareness. The capacity to move across disciplinary boundaries, to connect insights from different epistemic traditions, and to sustain dialogue across difference should not be understood as secondary competencies. In practice, they constitute forms of intellectual, collaborative leadership and partnership.

Institutional responsibility is therefore central. ECRs working across departments require stable pathways, appropriate mentorship, and evaluative frameworks that recognise cross-boundary contributions and IE. Project leaders need to cultivate inclusive practices that legitimise diverse forms of expertise. Translation, mediation, and the maintenance of team cohesion should be acknowledged as substantive scholarly labour rather than relegated to invisible administrative work.

Interdisciplinary research practice has also led me to reconsider how I interpret moments of misunderstanding. Earlier in my career, I viewed them as indicators of inadequacy, but I now see them as inherent to work conducted across epistemic communities. The task is neither to assimilate uncritically into other fields nor to defend one's disciplinary identity rigidly; it is to translate without erasing oneself, to question constructively, and to build connections while maintaining intellectual integrity.

If institutions genuinely seek to address complex societal challenges, they have to recognise that this collaborative labour is foundational rather than peripheral. IE is not incidental; it is cultivated through the sustained exercise of reflexivity, resilience, and relational practice in interdisciplinary research. Valuing such work requires valuing those who enable knowledge to travel across disciplinary boundaries, even when their contributions are not immediately quantifiable within conventional metrics.

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Rethinking Interdisciplinarity as Intercultural Dialogue: Peer-to-peer conversations and inclusive research culture

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Abstract

This article critically reflects on phase two (2025/26) of the University of Warwick Enhancing Research Culture project 'Countering Silos and Hierarchies through Peer-to-Peer Research-in-Progress Conversations'. Building on phase one's emphasis on developing inclusive research conversation spaces, it foregrounds interdisciplinarity: how to design activities that enable interdisciplinary conversations as a form of 'intercultural dialogue'. Drawing on participants' written reflections, discussion transcripts and evaluations, we examine how teamwork-oriented design enabled participants to reflect, via exposure to alternative perspectives, on the disciplinary and professional assumptions they made regarding research practice. We argue that fostering research collaboration requires a more nuanced approach than simply bringing people together and expecting meaningful research exchange to just happen.

Keywords: inclusive research culture; interdisciplinarity; intercultural dialogue; research conversations

Introduction

Developing research culture is increasingly viewed as an important mission for the UK higher education sector, a key strategy to maintaining its global reputation. Within UK universities, interdisciplinarity, collaboration, and inclusion have been increasingly positioned as strategic priorities in the promotion of an inclusive research ecosystem (**British Academy, 2016; Evis, 2022; REF, 2023**). Yet institutional discourse often frames these ambitions instrumentally, emphasising innovation and impact while overlooking the cultural, disciplinary and relational labour that underpins meaningful collaboration across disciplines and roles.

This paper examines how purposefully designed peer-to-peer conversational interventions can bring to the surface and reshape the cultural dynamics that underpin inclusive research practices. Drawing on a series of research conversationⁱ activities within small cross-role, cross-status and cross-departmental groups, it explores how interdisciplinary research conversations operate not simply as exchanges of expertise but as forms of intercultural dialogue capable of challenging exclusionary disciplinary voices and supporting a more inclusive research culture.

As researchers in the University of Warwick's School of Education, Learning and Communication Sciences (SELCS), we developed the project 'Countering Silos and Hierarchies through Peer-to-Peer Research-in-Progress Conversations' (**Smith et al., n.d.**), which was funded by the University of Warwick Enhancing Research Culture fund (2025–26). After an initial emphasis on developing inclusive research conversation spaces, the project's second phase revolved around interdisciplinarity. We developed three activities—a Q&A card game, guided peer dialogues and a scenario-based research task—deliberately designed to foster meaningful conversations across diverse disciplinary and professional roles, participants confronted differences that typically remain hidden in output-driven research cultures. Discussion among authors in response to participant feedback focused on three key areas: (1) *What do we mean by 'inclusive' research culture in a higher education institution?* (2) *How had participants engaged with one another?* and (3) *How did the research-conversation activities we designed contribute to the development of inclusive and interdisciplinary research culture?*

To address these overarching questions, this paper first contextualises and describes the activities we piloted before critically reflecting on their potential to foster an inclusive research culture enabling plurality, dialogue and connection across roles, disciplines and career stages. Four interrelated insights are foregrounded, relating to: (1) designing inclusive research culture; (2) activity design as a catalyst for research conversations; (3) interdisciplinarity as intercultural dialogue; and (4) the foundational role of

relational and affective dimensions. Taken together, these insights align with UK Research and Innovation's (UKRI's) advocacy of 'a culture that welcomes difference and supports constructive debate and challenge' (UKRI, 2024).

Project Activity Design

Updated group Q&A card game

Building on a Q&A card game originally designed for a departmental 'away day' (Alibaba et al., 2025), this activity aimed to promote discussion within small, cross-role and cross-status groups of students and staff. Postgraduate research (PGR) students, professional services staff, and teaching-focused, research-focused and research and teaching-focused staff were given a set of questions about institutional research experiences, expectations, and personal motivations.

Event 1, involving two meetings held two weeks apart, brought together participants from four previously distinct departments or centres (Applied Linguistics, Education Studies, Lifelong Learning and Teacher Education), which were in the process of amalgamating to form the School of Education, Learning and Communication Sciences (SELCS). In the first meeting, mixed cross-role / cross-status and cross-departmental groups of SELCS students and staff were formed to play the original card game (Alibaba et al., 2025). In the second meeting, we introduced five new follow-up question cardsⁱⁱ in response to insights that emerged from the first card game event and peer dialogue activities that had taken place in between (see 'Peer Dialogue' below). These additional questions invited participants to reflect on whether and how their views of research, their own research engagement, and others' roles in research had shifted because of participation in research conversations. They also prompted forward-looking reflection by asking what both the new school and participating individuals could do to sustain and facilitate further research conversations.

Event 2, also involving two meetings held two weeks apart, brought together staff and PGR students more broadly from across the Faculty of Social Sciences (FSS). For the first meeting, the card game was adapted in a different way, this time in order to intentionally embed an interdisciplinary perspective within the questions themselves. In addition to exploring personal experiences, emotions and research-related challenges, the refined twenty questionsⁱⁱⁱ explicitly addressed issues of collaboration across fields, learning from other disciplines, and navigating institutional research processes while encouraging participants to envision interdisciplinary research. This design aimed to facilitate open discussion of the affective, practical and structural dimensions of conducting

interdisciplinary research and provide space for participants from diverse professional and disciplinary backgrounds to identify shared concerns and complementary expertise within an interdisciplinary, dialogic setting.

These adapted versions of our original questions retained a playful, low-stakes and low-pressure format while serving as reflexive tools for modelling an inclusive, interdisciplinary research culture. Taking turns to ask and answer questions in the game ensured that everyone had an equal opportunity to share personal stories, fostering inclusivity and attentiveness within cross-role and cross-status groups. The design enabled participants from diverse disciplinary backgrounds and roles to reflect on and express their perspectives, while also encouraging spontaneous discussion about research.

Peer dialogue

In-person or online peer dialogues, scheduled by participants themselves between event meetings, involved relatively extended, structured research conversations among peers. During the first meeting of each event, participants were paired for peer dialogue with another member who had a different role or level of experience in another department. This approach encouraged participants to challenge silos and hierarchical dynamics during the dialogue (Alibaba et al., 2025). Participants conducted the dialogues within a mutually agreed space and timeframe, with guidelines provided (2025). Facilitating empathetic, non-hierarchical conversations (2025), the guidelines underscored active and attentive listening, respect, confidentiality, rapport, and post-conversation reflection.

Each conversation lasted approximately fifty minutes, with each participant taking an extended twenty-minute turn as speaker while the other listened attentively, followed by a ten-minute collaborative reflection on the dialogue experience. The prompt-questions provided participants with possible research engagement topics as starting points for the dialogue. However, participants were not restricted to the questions in the guidelines, and this format allowed unanticipated insights to emerge. As speaker, participants addressed three main questions regarding their engagement with research:

- 1) What does research mean to you in your current role?
- 2) What motivates your research involvement?
- 3) What are your aspirations for future research?

The listener's role was to focus on attentive and non-judgmental listening, using techniques such as paraphrasing, clarifying, and probing to support the speaker's reflection without interjecting personal experiences or

opinions. After each participant had their twenty-minute speaking turn, a ten-minute informal discussion encouraged immediate reflection on the dialogue experience.

Scenario-based research task: 'Dinosaur Park or Zoo?'

'Dinosaur Park or Zoo?' (also known as 'Dino')^{iv} is a collaborative, and playful research simulation we designed specifically for Event 2 in order to promote interdisciplinary thinking and teamwork. As with the Q&A card game and peer dialogue, it involves cross-role, cross-status, cross-department collaboration, with teams of four or five participants each formed to ensure as balanced a cross-disciplinary, inter-status and inter-role mix as possible. In the hypothetical scenario presented, teams advised a fictional billionaire on the research needed to fund a dinosaur park featuring resurrected dinosaurs or a zoo for endangered animals. Because the task was entirely hypothetical, participants could engage freely without the real-world pressures of making high-stakes decisions, being judged on outcomes, or producing research that would be professionally evaluated. This allowed them to pool their creativity and engage in interdisciplinary conversations. The exercise required participants to come up with research questions and methods, drawing on their professional or academic expertise to develop a joint proposal to guide the billionaire's decision-making.

The activity began with a brief icebreaker in which participants named different dinosaur species and endangered animals, fostering engagement and easing participants into the themed collaborative task. Following this, each participant spent five minutes reflecting individually on how they would approach the research task. Participants then shared their ideas in a clockwise sequence, asking questions and discussing the pros and cons of each suggestion. The team then combined ideas into a proposal, selected a representative to present their recommendations to the larger group, and pitched their proposal to the billionaire. After hearing all the group pitches, the billionaire chose a project to fund, providing participants with a simulated real-world consequence.

Unlike the previous two activities, which focused primarily on individual reflection and dialogue with peers, 'Dino' required participants to negotiate differing perspectives shaped by their disciplinary backgrounds and professional experiences, integrate diverse viewpoints and reach consensus on the final proposal. The hypothetical nature of the task allowed participants to experiment with research strategies, while also considering ethical issues, and the practical implications of decision-making. It also exposed participants to a range of priorities and perspectives from other disciplines, fostering awareness of how varying

expertise, assumptions, and approaches shape collaborative research proposals and decision-making.

Study Analysis

In this section, we bring together the reflections of the project-steering group with participant data to offer insights in four thematic areas. Participant feedback for Event 2 (the FSS event) was gathered under circumstances of informed consent for sharing and with ethical approval from the University of Warwick's Humanities and Social Sciences Research Ethics Committee, so excerpts from this event are used to illustrate the insights presented. These also apply to Event 1 (the SELCS event).

Research culture in UK universities is often framed in terms of excellence, competitiveness and innovation. Institutional strategies tend to emphasise outputs, funding, international reputation, and interdisciplinary collaboration. Yet, as the Royal Society highlights, research culture:

encompasses 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 broader definition invites us to move beyond metrics and consider how research is lived: who participates, whose knowledge is legitimised, and how relationships shape research practice.

Phase two of the 'Countering Silos and Hierarchies through Peer-to-Peer Research-in-Progress Conversations' project approached research culture as something enacted through everyday conversational practices. Rather than assuming that collaboration naturally follows proximity, we treated research conversations as an intervention site. The paragraphs that follow centre on four interrelated insights relating to: (1) designing inclusive research culture; (2) activity design as a catalyst for research conversations; (3) interdisciplinarity as intercultural dialogue; and (4) relational and affective dimensions of research culture.

Designing inclusive research culture

Our intervention treated research culture as enacted through conversational design. A central reflection from the first phase of the project (Alibaba et al., 2025) was that inclusive research culture does not arise accidentally or organically; it must be intentionally structured and continuously nurtured, especially in university environments characterised by hierarchies related to disciplinary prestige and competitive performance cultures. Without intentional intervention, there is a tendency for university staff and students to reproduce familiar

patterns of interaction: senior with senior, discipline with discipline, and so forth. As highlighted in a 2020 Wellcome report, such patterns of interaction themselves can result in 'poor research culture' leading to stress and anxiety in the workplace and even mental health problems, as well as having a detrimental impact on research itself (**Wellcome, 2020**).

The activities in phase two were therefore consciously designed to ensure awareness-raising towards a more positive and inclusive research culture while countering silos and hierarchies. As described above, participants were profiled in advance and grouped intentionally across disciplinary backgrounds and professional roles as a design choice that prioritised difference rather than comfort. Peer dialogue pairs were deliberately selected rather than self-chosen, ensuring that participants engaged with colleagues outside their immediate networks. This was not a neutral administrative decision; it was a cultural intervention that required facilitation and subtle organisation. This strategic choice challenged the implicit assumption that collaboration emerges naturally among members of universities. Instead, the project treated inclusive research culture as something that must be deliberately designed. Inclusion here meant not only representation but structured encounter-enabling conditions in which participants had to recognise the legitimacy of alternative research trajectories, roles, and forms of expertise.

Our purposeful design was validated through analysis of participants' written reflections and peer-dialogue reviews. Recurring themes included the value of working with and learning from others (including senior colleagues), and the value of involvement of usually unheard 'others' (emphasising the involvement of professional services staff, teaching-focussed staff, PGRs and GTAs in the research process, and developing a growing awareness of alternative perspectives). For example:

'I think I know others better, like knowing their research interest!'
(**Event 2, Meeting 1 written reflection**)

'[I could] recognise other perspectives on the same problem; enhancing one's own thinking by incorporating others.' (**Event 2, Meeting 2 written reflection**)

These reflections suggest that the intentional structuring of encounters across roles and hierarchies facilitated not merely interaction but recognition of previously peripheral or under-acknowledged forms of expertise.

These findings resonate with Tucker and Tilt (**2019**), who emphasise the significance of institutional relationships in shaping perceptions of collegial and organisational support within research culture. In our case, the deliberate design of mixed-role dialogues appeared to strengthen

participants' sense of institutional connectedness. Inclusion therefore operated not only at the level of representation but at the level of relational infrastructure: participants reported a heightened awareness of shared endeavour and mutual dependence within the research ecosystem.

Activity design as a catalyst for research conversations

A second key insight concerns how specific activity designs afford particular forms of research conversation. The card-based dialogue activity functioned as a structured yet open-ended mechanism for enabling dialogue in general. It enabled all group participants to articulate their research identities, motivations, and trajectories. It promoted interpersonal connection and recognition. Participants described becoming aware of shared experiences and differences in career paths. Analysis of participants' reflections following the workshop activities supported this insight. For example:

'I think voicing my experience and my insights out and being heard by others itself is very valuable.' (Event 2, Meeting 1 plenary discussion)

'We talked about one question on what inspired my research. It was quite interesting to hear that people's motivations are diverse. Some people started their research randomly, while some people started their research because they have life experiences in it.' (FSS Event 1, Meeting 1 plenary discussion)

This format primarily facilitated interpersonal connection and awareness of self. The activity afforded recognition and validation, which is particularly important for those who may feel marginalised within the dominant research environment.

In contrast, the 'Dino' game shifted the mode of engagement. Participants were tasked with collaboratively generating research ideas and designing a project. The activity required them to draw explicitly on their disciplinary backgrounds, knowledge bases, and professional skills. Crucially, it required negotiation. Differences in methodological assumptions, definitions of evidence, project timelines, and even what counts as a 'research question' surfaced organically through the task. The Dino game, therefore, did more than encourage collaboration; it made difference visible and consequential. Participants became aware of how their disciplinary training shaped the way they approached problem-framing, design, and evaluation. Rather than simply exchanging perspectives, participants had to reconcile them in order to complete the task. In this sense, activity design shaped not only the content of conversation but the depth and direction of reflexivity. This demonstrates that 'research conversations' do not serve a single aim of bringing people together.

Reflection-focused activities, rather, afford identity negotiation and interpersonal acknowledgement. Furthermore, task-oriented, collaborative designs provide the space for negotiation, perspective-taking, and reflexivity. According to the initial decisions and issues for further consultation statement for the next Research Excellence Framework (REF), this aims to 'recognise and reward a broader range of research outputs, activities and impacts, as well as reward those institutions that strive to create a positive research culture and nurture their research and research-enabling staff.' (REF, 2023: 2). Universities seeking to encourage inclusive research culture must therefore consider not just bringing people together but how the structure of engagement shapes what becomes possible. Task-based collaborative designs surface epistemic difference and prompt intercultural negotiation. A nuanced research culture strategy requires both.

Interdisciplinarity as intercultural dialogue

The most significant conceptual shift arising in project team members' minds from phase two was our reframing of interdisciplinarity as a form of intercultural dialogue. Within UK universities, interdisciplinarity is frequently presented as a long-standing strategic objective embedded in education and research agendas (British Academy, 2016; Evis, 2022), typically associated with collaboration, innovation, and impact. Yet this instrumental framing often overlooks the cultural adjustments required when individuals from different disciplinary and professional backgrounds attempt to collaborate. More importantly, it obscures the need to understand interdisciplinarity not only as a mode of knowledge production but as a cultural condition capable of challenging exclusionary disciplinary voices (Callard & Fitzgerald, 2015).

If disciplines and professional roles are understood as socially constructed communities, then interdisciplinary collaboration can be approached as a form of intercultural encounter. Hofstede (1994:5) defines culture as 'the collective programming of the mind which distinguishes the members of one group or category of people from another'.^v Applied to research contexts, this suggests that the understandings and ways of looking at research, designing projects, drawing on knowledge, and collaborating will differ depending on disciplines and professional roles. Similarly, Matsumoto (1996: 16) describes culture as 'the set of attitudes, values, beliefs, and behaviours shared by a group of people, but different for each individual, communicated from one generation to the next'. From this perspective, disciplinary communities and the various roles in higher education embody particular norms, values, and expectations about what counts as legitimate research practice, while still allowing individual interpretation. Taken together, these conceptualisations support the

argument that interdisciplinary work is not merely technical coordination across expertise but engagement across culturally embedded ways of knowing and meaning making.

The 'Dino' game made these cultural differences visible. Participants did not simply combine expertise; they confronted divergent assumptions about problem definition, methodology, and knowledge production. Differences that often remain implicit within disciplinary silos became visible through the task, and negotiation was required. Participants reflected on their own encounter with disciplinary habits and recognised that alternative approaches were equally valid. For example:

'About myself – that I am oriented towards evidence-based research (starting with the data to inform the final output or decision in this case). From the activity in general – that people's research thought process can be very different.' (Event 2, Meeting 2 plenary discussion)

The game enabled participants to see that being aware of the differences, as well as finding points of connection that allow them to build common ground, was an integral part of the research conversations and the meaning-making process. This reframing positions interdisciplinarity as intercultural dialogue. Rather than seeking immediate synthesis, intercultural dialogue foregrounds reflexivity, perspective change, and mutual recognition, which is in line with the common ground required by interdisciplinarity for reconciliation of varied (and, at times, conflicting) disciplinary insights (Repko & Szostak, 2020), as demonstrated in this participant response:

I think it helps me see my default approach to research and action. I think there are general categories I could generate in terms of perspectives on research, e.g., practical/technical approach, normative/critical approach. They are not necessarily clear-cut, but different people have placed different focus and weight on things. It's also interesting to see different attitudes to the given and different understandings of power relationships. Do you challenge it? Do you listen to it? How do you negotiate? (Event 2, Meeting 2 plenary discussion)

The activity supported participants in engaging with difference productively rather than smoothing it over. This was substantiated through the themes that emerged in the reflective writing at the end of the intervention workshops, where participants highlighted 'learning from others' across roles and career stages:

'What I have learned is that it's really interesting to see how every group presents their own perspective on how they see and understand the same activity. Another interesting part of this activity is that we can

also see how other expertise could contribute on the dialogue and shape my own thinking.' (**Event 2, Meeting 2 plenary discussion**)

These responses suggest that interdisciplinary engagement prompted participants to reflect on their own disciplinary assumptions and recognise alternative ways of approaching research problems. Rather than simply combining expertise, participants engaged in a process of negotiating meaning across distinct research cultures.

Research Conversation events functioned as interventions within the institutional environment; by acknowledging disciplinary differences and recognising the importance of involving others in the research process, they helped establish intercultural dialogue. Creating such inclusive spaces is important for facilitating research conversations among staff and students at UK universities, as they visibly contributed to a more inclusive research culture in which plurality was legitimised and points of connection were established rather than hierarchies being reinforced.

Relational and affective dimensions of research culture

Finally, the reflections highlight the relational and affective underpinnings of research culture. Participants frequently referenced feelings of isolation, stress, and fragmentation in their research lives (**Tucker and Tilt, 2019**). The Research Conversation events recontextualised research relationships: colleagues became collaborators, listeners, and co-thinkers rather than 'the other' or distant colleagues.

Participants emphasised the importance of creating spaces where researchers could regularly meet, exchange ideas, and build relationships. Many respondents noted that sustained conversations depended on supportive environments, peer networks, and opportunities for informal interaction alongside structured dialogue:

I learned that even though our research topics are quite different, we face similar challenges, such as managing time effectively and maintaining motivation during the writing phase. I also gained insight into different strategies for structuring literature reviews and using conceptual frameworks. (**Written reflection on Event 2 peer dialogue**)

Listening to others that you are not the only one that sometimes feels disappointed or lonely. (**Event 2, Meeting 1 plenary discussion**)

These reflections highlight that a positive research culture needs to be sustained not only through institutional strategies but also through relational practices that enable trust, recognition and shared intellectual engagement. These interpersonal dimensions are not peripheral to research excellence; they are foundational. A positive research culture, as institutional discourse suggests, fosters innovation and collaboration while

ensuring members feel valued and supported (Nind, 2017). Our findings suggest that such validation emerges through structured conversational spaces that enable empathy, shared vulnerability, and recognition.

Importantly, these were not purely professional outcomes. Interpersonal connection supported epistemic openness. When participants felt respected and heard, they were more willing to question assumptions and engage across difference. Thus, relational trust and intercultural dialogue were mutually supported, creating the conditions in which diverse perspectives and forms of meaning-making could be voiced without fear of judgement. In this sense, the affective and relational dimensions of research culture were not an adjunct but the mechanism through which a more inclusive and balanced institutional research ecosystem was enacted.

Conclusion

In phase two, then, we have gone beyond our phase one intention to address departmental silos and hierarchies as horizontal and vertical barriers to effective research conversations. Through iterative development of existing activities (the card activity with new questions) as well as the development of new activities ('Dino'), we showed how intentional research conversations can effectively be deployed within wider groupings: for a new school coming together and then on a faculty basis. We have continued to carefully design and manage participation, for example through ensuring participants with different roles, status and disciplinary background work together in conversational groups and peer dialogues. Indeed, our critical reflections highlight the importance of conscious design, varied conversational affordances, recognition of interdisciplinarity as intercultural dialogue, and attention to the relational conditions that sustain research engagement as key elements of an inclusive research culture in a UK University. These four conditions align with UKRI's definition of an inclusive research culture as something which incorporates not only research practice and impact but also emphasises means of support and engagement of researchers.

One recommendation from these project activities is that discretely funded initiatives such as this can be usefully mainstreamed by institutions committed to creating inclusive research cultures. With so many differences across the institution between PGRs, staff of different contracts and career stages, we have highlighted the care and attention needed for genuine interdisciplinarity, collaboration, and inclusion to be developed. In particular, our framing of interdisciplinarity as intercultural dialogue draws attention to the role of disciplinary norms in the creation of atomised research cultures, which can, by their nature, exclude others and prevent the very interdisciplinary collaborations that institutions claim

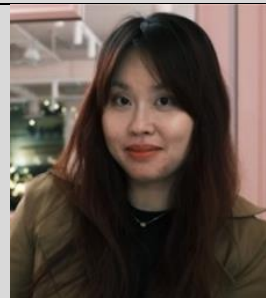
to value. For such multiple cultures to integrate into a wider research culture that supports excellence, creating a rationale for intentionally designed intercultural activities/spaces and impetus for others to participate remains vital.

By exploring how staff and students engage with one another around specific tasks, we have argued that carefully designed research conversations can contribute to an inclusive research culture in a UK university. Such a culture must intentionally integrate subcultures. Indeed, in the contemporary high-pressure HE environment, staff and students need incentives and carefully curated opportunities to engage with one another research-wise. Given the importance of research culture—encompassing the behaviours, values, expectations, attitudes and norms of our research communities and the influence on both researchers' career paths and the way that research is conducted and communicated—our project has shown that universities need to intentionally curate conversational spaces for inclusive research that promote critical self-reflection and intercultural exchange as well as interpersonal connections.

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Endnotes

ⁱ For the purposes of the project, we define research conversations as 'relatively casual conversations about or relating to research, occurring in informal settings'.

ⁱⁱ Event 1, Meeting 2 instructions and questions can be found here: https://warwick.ac.uk/research/research-culture-at-warwick/counteringsilos/18_march_research_conversations_project_cards.pdf.

(NB: The first meeting questions were as presented in **Alibaba et al., 2025**.)

ⁱⁱⁱ Event 2, Meeting 1 instructions and questions are available here:

<https://warwick.ac.uk/research/research-culture-at-warwick/counteringsilos/refined-group-qa-game-with-instructions.pdf>.

^{iv} Instructions can be found here: https://warwick.ac.uk/research/research-culture-at-warwick/counteringsilos/1606_pdf_dino_or_zoo.pdf

^v Although Hofstede's work focuses on national cultures, the idea that groups develop shared assumptions, norms and habitual ways of interpreting the world can be extended to disciplinary and professional communities.

Co-Creating Meaningful HEI Work Experience Programmes Through Research Collaboration

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Abstract

With recent updates to the education requirement benchmarks used by the UK's Office for Standards in Education, Children's Services and Skills (Ofsted), there is a growing requirement work experience programmes in both higher education institutions (HEIs) and beyond to create meaningful experiences for students. This Critical Reflection discusses the aims and outcomes of a newly created network of HEIs in the Midlands collaborating to develop best practice for hosting work experience programmes. It demonstrates how a project-based delivery of work experience can provide an enriching experience for both participants and hosts, It discusses the use of work experience co-creation among institutions, describes how the network has delivered work experience within individual institutions, and discusses future plans for the network, describing how incorporating its learning outcomes can improve the overall delivery of work-experience placements in HEIs.

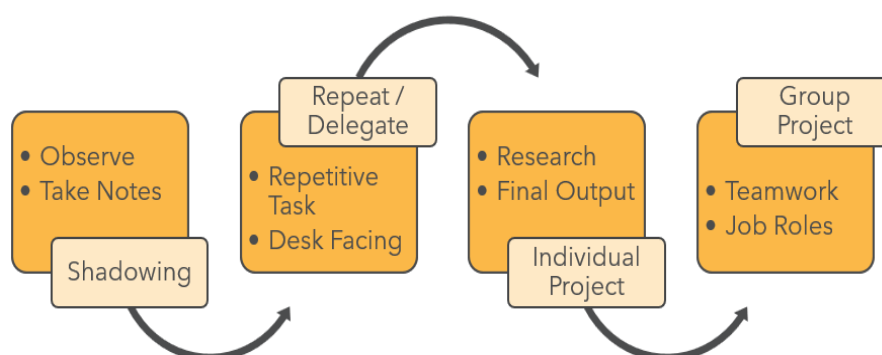
Keywords: work experience programmes; employability schemes; research co-creation; research culture; Gatsby Benchmarks

Introduction

In 2025, a national research culture development initiative, ‘Addressing social mobility issues in STEM’, funded through Research England, was introduced to build a collaborative network exploring various approaches to work-experience programme delivery in a HEI context. The key aspects of research culture being targeted by the network include open access to research, enabling leadership, and creating opportunities for more people to access education. This was particularly important because, as Shift (2024) highlights, the open sharing of knowledge empowers staff at all levels of the organisational structure and helps increase impact.

The initiative specifically grouped leadership partners across three universities, the University of Warwick, the University of Birmingham, and the University of Nottingham. By doing so, we, the affiliated researchers, were able to learn and implement modifications to our own individual programmes to provide the best possible work experience for young people at our respective institutions. The programmes are targeted at youth between the ages of 14 and 18, as they finish their compulsory education and move towards higher education. The catchment areas for the programmes are local to the institute hosting them; for example, the University of Birmingham provides the experience in partnership with a Birmingham-based school.

Figure 1: The progression of work experience models



Work experience programmes are offered all over the United Kingdom by a range of companies and organisations. The form these programmes take often depends on a few core specifications from the host, including allocated resources, allotted time, and available facilities. Figure 1 (above) shows the progression of work experience programme types, starting with the most common form, ‘work shadowing’ (where a participant observes someone’s working day), to other forms, which can include performing repetitive or non-critical tasks like data entry or photocopying and which

provide limited experience of the variable tasks a role typically requires. Alternatively, work experience programmes can be created using a *project-based approach* instead of being built around a specific role. These projects can be completed individually or by a group.

To aid with the sharing of work experience programme best practice, our network adopted a model of co-creation, enabling a more collaborative environment between our respective universities. All parties entered the network with a ready-made work experience structure that had been developed and delivered for multiple years. This created an opportunity to share experiences, resources, and understanding what could potentially be adapted to meet other institutions' needs.

Together, we created and published resources through the network 'W.E.Inspire' (2025), allowing others to follow and/or join. Each stakeholder learns from each another, contributing their own insights and suggestions. This is an important aspect of co-creation:

Co-creation ought to be viewed as a process that provides an opportunity for on-going interaction, where the organization is willing to share its world with external stakeholders and can generate in return the insight that can be derived from their engagement (Ind and Cotes, 2013).

Another type of co-creation is found in the relationship between educator and student during the work experience programme itself. We often discuss with students their personal experiences so that modifications can be made either in real time or for the next cohort. For example, we ask students about their interests and future career plans so that we can prioritise interactions with research groups or members of staff that have lived experience to share in that area.

Project-based learning

Our programmes are centred around project-based learning, with a core underlying topic or problem to be solved. Often these problems are based on relevant research activities that are taking place within the university. Bolick et al. (2024) emphasises the requirement for education to contain meaningful, contextually relevant curricula and how these are approached using project-based exercises and experiences. Using the seven project design elements introduced by the Buck Institute for Education (2022), they present the key elements of project-based learning. The first element they identify is 'authenticity', particularly its connection to place-based education. In this sense, a project that is assigned to a student should be realistically achievable and have the potential to make real-world impact and connect to the everyday experiences of students (Larmer and Mergendoller, 2015).

The work experience programmes are designed to provide a mix of hands-on research in a laboratory setting, independent research and group tasks, all of which culminates in a group presentation at the end of the programme. Learning outcomes (LOs) are not mandatory but can be defined by the HEI prior to the experience, based on the facilities and access to resources that they have. The programme at the University of Warwick was Engineering focussed, and would include LO's based on car design, materials knowledge and manufacturing. The programmes are delivered to young people from the local community, based on relationships established with local schools. The experience they gain and the research that they see and contribute to is based on work the HEI is doing with or for the local area. An example is the Coventry Light Rail project, an installation of a light rail system within the city of Coventry, for which a work experience at the University of Warwick was tailored to include research and design for this project, emphasising the level of impact our research can have.

The Programmes

The research group considered the following work experience programmes, which represent a range of cohorts and practices across all three participating universities. Figure 2 (next page) features key information for each, including procedures and impacts.

University of Warwick: Warwick Manufacturing Group

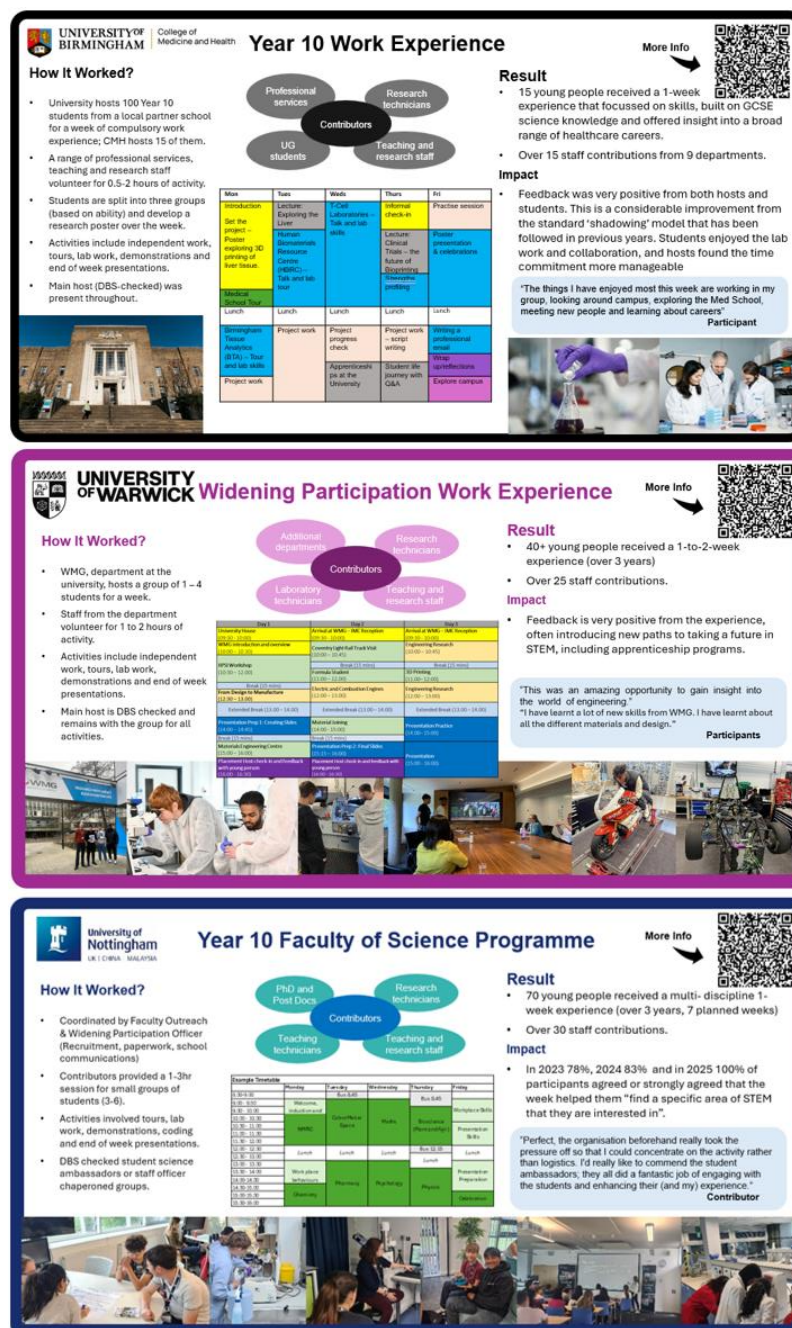
The University of Warwick's work experience programme, hosted by the university's Warwick Manufacturing Group (WMG), has been running since 2021. Students for this programme are all 16 to 18 years old and working through their GCSEs and A-levels; they are recruited through a national work experience scheme for young people from lower socio-economic backgrounds supported by STEM Learning.

The programme is designed so an individual host remains with a small group of students across a week's delivery. This allows staff members interested in hosting to plan, prepare and take part by delivering sessions of short activities or lectures. Before each week's programme begins, the individual work experience host undertakes the necessary training and certification for the role, and all teaching staff also undergo safeguarding training. Risk assessments are stored locally for all staff to access, especially important in the complex manufacturing environment of WMG.

Using project-based learning, each week's host assigns a 'real-world' relevant research topic to the group in the form of a 'leading' question. The

week is then split into short segments that begin to build up a new body of knowledge from and for the students. Students take on specific jobs and areas of focus across the group. At the end of the week, students present their findings as a group.

Figure 2: One-page information packs for each university's work experience programmes



University of Nottingham: Faculty of Science

The University of Nottingham Faculty of Science work experience programme started in 2022 and has run each year since, supporting

seventy local Year 10 students (aged 14 to 15) with an interest in science. The programme addresses many of the barriers to work-experience opportunities within the university, most significantly, a lack of staff confidence and knowledge required to organise and facilitate placements, poor connections between staff and suitable placement students, and hesitancy to take students under sixteen on placements.

Over the course of a week, students in small groups of three to six visit multiple departments in the Faculty of Science. During these visits, students are able to learn about science careers directly from technical, research, and academic staff and to engage in practical tasks relating to these roles. At the end of the week, each student gives a presentation on their specific area of interest, enabling them to demonstrate professional skills development.

This programme is run centrally via the faculty's Outreach and Widening Participation Officer, which enables the recruiting of students without links to the university. Specifically, it helps reach potential students in geographical areas where people are less likely to attend university, those who have received free school meals, have spent more than three months in local authority care, are estranged from their immediate family, or have refugee status. More than thirty staff members from schools and research centres in the Faculty of Science contributed to the programme, reducing the time and administrative burdens on staff through the sharing duties.

University of Birmingham: College of Medicine and Health

The College of Medicine and Health (CMH) hosts fifteen Year 10 students (aged 14 to 15) annually for a week-long work experience programme as part of the wider partnership between local secondary school the University of Birmingham School (UoBS) and University of Birmingham. This represents only a small proportion of the work experience activity taking place across the college as a whole; between October 2024 and August 2025, a further 85 students undertook work placements within the college, arranged through the professional development organisation In2Science's In2STEM programme or directly with members of staff.

Historically, work experience at the CMH was managed by the college's Outreach team, with a focus on safeguarding and ensuring hosts planned a timetable of activities for their students. Specific work placements varied depending on the host's experience and role but typically followed a traditional shadowing model involving performing administrative tasks, observing meetings, and gaining a general understanding of the university as a workplace.

The UoBS placement week also initially followed this approach, with students placed across professional services and research teams. While this helped students develop communication, time-management and organisational skills, it also presented challenges: student engagement varied, and some students felt isolated or unsure of what they were expected to take away from their time in the programme. Some hosts also encountered behavioural issues that they did not feel prepared to manage, leading to a reluctance to participate again.

Case Study: Developing the Birmingham programme

After initially connecting with eventual project co-founders from the University of Warwick and the University of Nottingham at the Midlands Innovation Talent Technical Managers strategy meeting in September 2024, the University of Birmingham chose to pilot a new approach to work experience programmes based on the recommendations from the WMG project report (**Carnegie & Ogunkola, 2023**). We selected the UoBS Year 10 work experience week in summer of 2025 as the testbed for this redesigned model.

The WMG report recommends structured project-based work experience models built around defined activity types and tailored to student ability and interest. Using this framework, the University of Birmingham's 2025 programme was redesigned around the 'guided' model recommended for mixed-ability cohorts, newly focusing on confidence-building and transferable skills. Students worked in small groups, with each group assigned a research question as the scaffolding for the week's activities. The activity timetable now balanced practical activities, independent work, lectures, tours and reflection.

We surveyed the students before and after the week, using a response scale from 'strongly agree' to 'strongly disagree', to measure the impact of the new model. Student responses showed overall improved scores across the metrics that we measured, with the largest improvement across the scale being in 'confidence presenting' (the mean score increased from 3.4/5 to 4.73/5) and 'carrying out independent research' (the mean score increased from 3.73/5 to 4.73/5). This was closely followed by 'confidence using digital tools' (mean score increased from 3.93/5 to 4.73/5) and 'talking to adults' (mean score increased from 3.93/5 to 4.67/5). The group were also asked what they enjoyed and what would have improved the week. Responses indicated they appreciated working in groups, hands-on learning in labs through experimentation, and learning about a variety of career opportunities within healthcare science. Overall, students wanted a greater emphasis on independence, exploration, and hands-on activities,

alongside a more relaxed and balanced schedule. Importantly, student feedback demonstrated far greater consistency of experience than under the previous work-shadowing model, where student-perceived quality varied significantly between placements.

After this successful pilot of the UoBS programme, the University of Birmingham would like to create guidance and resources to help roll out the programme more widely in the college and eventually the University as a whole. We also hope to create a set of clear learning objectives for Year 10 and Year 12 student groups to help our colleagues in work placement training focus their programmes and measure the impact of their placements. Finally, we plan to develop curriculum overview resources so that programmes can make clear connections to students' schoolwork to help support improved performance and attainment.

Beyond this, it is clear that the work being developed across all institutions needs to be backed up by the requirements of schools and their assessors. The Office for Standards in Education, Children's Services and Skills (Ofsted) use the Gatsby Benchmarks, published by the Gatsby Charitable Foundation in their 2015 Good Career Guidance Report (**Holman, 2015**). This provides as clear metrics for assessing an institution's ability to deliver career development programmes. Using these standards, we can tailor our work experience delivery accordingly.

Workshopping Work Experience Programmes at IRCC 2025

The collaborative research group delivered a series of ten-minute rotating workshops at the University of Warwick's 2025 International Research Culture Conference as part of research culture carousel sessions to attendees from a wide range of institutions, including other higher-education providers and representatives of industry organisations (**Carnegie et al., 2025**).

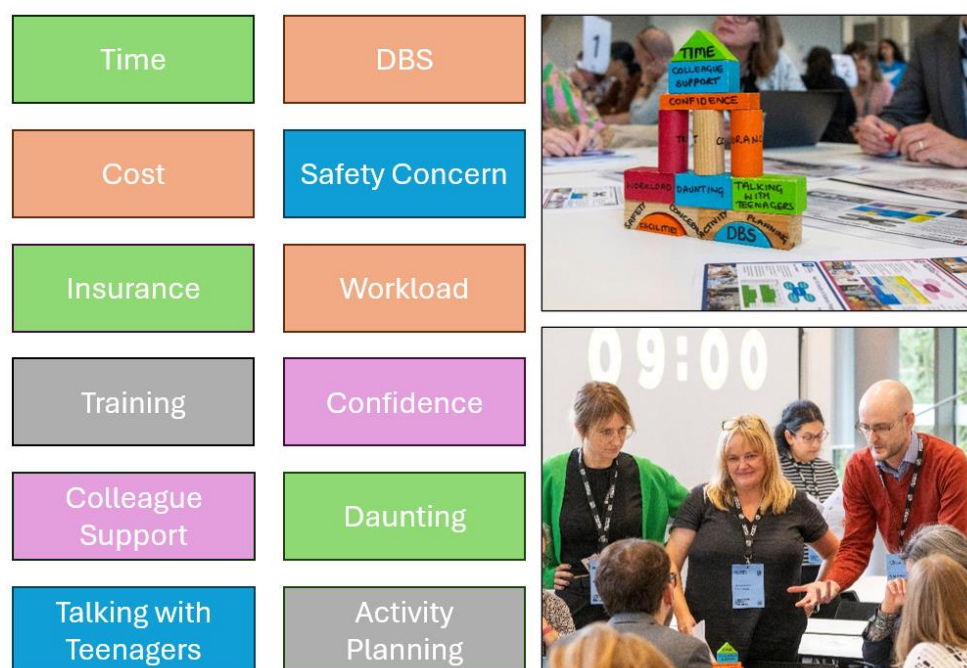
Although there is a national push for HEI engagement with meaningful work experience placement, it remains a struggle to achieve this benchmark for every student. To do so, more hosts must be identified and matched to students based on their needs and career plans. As a research group, we identified twelve key barriers that may prevent organisations from starting a work experience programme, shown in Figure 3 on the following page.

In each workshop rotation, we interacted with conference attendees to explore the barriers we collectively face when thinking about work experience, drawing on our own insights while also listening to others' experiences within their respective workplaces. Despite the diversity of

roles and institutions represented, clear and consistent themes emerged throughout the discussions, highlighting the shared challenges that we face. These include:

- a shortage of time for hosts to plan and deliver work experience placements, exacerbated by limited support from colleagues and individual workload challenges;
- concerns around legal requirements, including workplace insurance, DBS checks, safeguarding expectations and general safety;
- lack of budget to cover related costs such as DBS checks or additional resources;
- lack of confidence and limited knowledge of how to design an effective placement programme;
- concern at the prospect of working with teenagers.

*Figure 3: Discussing the barriers to meaningful work experience placement at IRCC 2025
(Photos: Hollis Photography, 2025)*



These discussions showed the value of collaboration and the importance of openly sharing our experiences. By using the examples of project-based work experience placements at our three institutions, we were able to show that building an experience where students work in groups is a great way of promoting collegiality. Working with students one on one also creates safeguarding issues and can make staff vulnerable to accusations of inappropriate behaviour. Group work also mimics most workplace

settings, where effectively working as part of a team is a crucial skill valued by employers.

Using resources such as WMG's timetable-building guidance (**Carnegie, 2025**) and adopting a clear theme can further increase confidence for those who may be unsure how to design an effective placement strategy. By sharing approaches across institutions, we have identified practical ways to distribute workload and streamline planning, making effective timetabling feel more achievable. For instance, setting a defined project also enables hosts to incorporate periods of independent work into the timetable. Although students still require supervision, this structure allows hosts to continue their own research alongside their placement activities and gives students experience in self-management, delivering a set task to deadline. Producing a timetable with clearly defined sessions and a coherent thematic focus also helps secure support from colleagues, as their contributions can be limited to specific, manageable, time-limited activities rather than planning and supporting an entire placement week.

Conclusion

The informal research network on work placement programmes formed by our three universities has shown the benefits of collaboration. While network participants work in different institutions and disparate departments and disciplines, we share similar experiences and challenges when supporting work-experience students and designing meaningful work placements. These challenges include a lack of specific expertise and a lack of time to devote to gaining it. Often work experience programme delivery functions as an add-on to the typical academic's workload and operates on individual goodwill alone, but the potential benefit of such programmes can be significant, increasing employability by 'building the skills of the future workforce' (**Department for Education, 2018**).

There is a range of different approaches deployed across our three institutions, and by working collaboratively, we have been able to benefit from the research and resources previously developed by one other, creating a positive and lasting impact on the research culture of each institution. For example, our case study identified how the University of Birmingham was able to tailor programmes created by the Warwick Manufacturing Group to their own university culture, creating a successful pilot programme.

Engagement with colleagues at other HEIs and beyond—most notably through attendance at the IRCC—has highlighted the broader transferability of these resources. Equally important has been the

opportunity to work with like-minded individuals who are passionate about improving work experience for students. This shared motivation acts as both a support network and a source of accountability when delivering these projects.

The coordination provided by the research network also supports the recruitment of a diverse group of students, not just those with links to current staff members. The programme structure supports continued growth and consistency that can be applied to other academic and university operational areas. Moving forward, our next steps include university-wide rollouts of our work experience programmes and improving the support available to widening-participation students. For instance, at the University of Birmingham, we hope to be able connect students with hosts they don't already know. We would also like to create clear differential learning outcomes for different age groups while continuing to improve links to relevant school curricula to enhance learning and support.

As government interest in both student career development and assessment benchmarks continues to grow, it is our hope that our collaborative research network will inspire new hosts to become work experience providers, growing the network to include other like-minded researchers running their own programmes across the UK and even internationally.

Acknowledgements

Funding from Research England helped facilitate research culture change for employability schemes at the University of Warwick.

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Figure 1: The progression of work experience models

Figure 2: One-page information packs for institute work experience programmes

Figure 3: Discussing barriers to work experience at IRCC 2025 (Photos: Hollis Photography, 2025)

Dr Craig Carnegie is an assistant professor in high-volume joining in the WMG department at the University of Warwick. As well as leading engineering projects on adhesives and mechanical joining, Craig created and heads up the department's Work Experience team. He founded the W.E.Inspire network, a national initiative to develop and support those delivering work experience programs across the UK.



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