

Untangling research culture: reflections from a university culture change project

EMMA ANGELL (University of Leicester). e.angell@leicester.ac.uk.

ALEX GODDARD (University of Leicester). alex.goddard@leicester.ac.uk.

Abstract

Research culture is often used as a broad term to describe the conditions, behaviours, expectations, and systems that shape researchers' experiences. In practice, however, many of the issues raised under the banner of research culture are not unique to research. They are also shaped by wider organisational culture, institutional processes, and the day-to-day cultures of teams, departments, and research groups.

This reflective paper draws on learning from I-REACCH, a university-wide research culture change project, to explore how the project team came to question the boundaries of "research culture". As the project developed, stakeholders increasingly looked to I-REACCH to respond to a wide range of concerns, from career development and recognition to wellbeing, communication, inclusion, workload, and local working practices. This prompted the team to ask whether these issues were best understood as research culture, organisational culture, team culture, or some combination of all three.

Through structured reflection, the core project team attempted to map culture-related issues across these domains. Rather than clarifying neat boundaries, the exercise revealed that most issues sat in the overlap. This paper argues that the value of such mapping lies not in producing a fixed categorisation, but in exposing the interconnected nature of culture change work. Research culture interventions are likely to be limited if they focus only on research-specific norms and incentives, without recognising the organisational systems and team-level experiences through which those norms are enacted.

The working paper offers a practitioner perspective on the challenge of defining, managing, and communicating the scope of research culture work within a complex institution. It suggests that research culture may be most usefully understood not as a bounded domain, but as an interaction between research-specific expectations, organisational structures, and team-level lived experience.

Introduction

In recent years, research culture has become an increasingly prominent focus for universities, funders, and the wider research sector (Vitae, 2019; Wellcome, no date). The term is often used to describe the conditions in which research takes place, including expectations around publication, funding, collaboration, integrity, leadership, career development, inclusion, and wellbeing (UKRI, 2024; Moran *et al.*, 2020). However, the

breadth of the term can make it difficult to define what research culture work is actually responsible for changing.

This working paper reflects on that challenge from the perspective of [I-REACCH](#) (Inclusive Research Environment Achieved through Culture Change), a [Wellcome-funded](#) University of Leicester culture change project focused on testing interventions to improve the research environment. As the project progressed, it became increasingly clear that people within the institution often looked to I-REACCH to address a very wide range of issues affecting researchers. Some of these were clearly research-specific, such as authorship practices, publication pressure, open research, and responsible research. Others were more closely connected to organisational systems, including HR processes, promotion and reward, workload allocation, leadership, bureaucracy, and institutional communication. Many were experienced most directly at team level, through relationships with managers, principal investigators, supervisors, peers, and local research groups.

This created a practical problem for the project team. If everything that affects researchers is described as research culture, then research culture work risks becoming responsible for everything. Yet if research culture is defined too narrowly, important influences on researchers' experiences may be excluded from view. The project therefore began to ask a set of deceptively simple questions: what counts as research culture? What belongs instead to organisational culture? Where does team culture fit? And, perhaps most importantly, does it help to draw these boundaries at all?

This paper does not seek to offer a definitive theoretical model of research culture. Instead, it presents a reflective account of how these questions emerged through practice, and what the process of trying to categorise culture-related issues revealed. The central argument is that many of the issues most important to researchers do not belong neatly to one domain. Rather, they emerge through the interaction of research-specific norms and incentives, organisational systems and structures, and team-level relationships and practices.

The problem of scope in research culture work

One of the recurring challenges for a research culture project is managing expectations about what the project can, and should, influence. During the lifetime of I-REACCH, stakeholders frequently raised issues that affected their experience as researchers and therefore appeared, at first sight, to be research culture concerns. However, many of these issues were rooted in wider organisational systems, local team dynamics, or a combination of both. As a result, the project increasingly encountered a tension between the broad range of challenges that researchers associated with research culture and the more limited sphere of influence available to a culture change project. This prompted an important question: when people ask a research culture initiative to 'fix' a problem, what assumptions are being made about the nature and origins of that problem?

Through I-REACCH, members of the wider internal research community raised a broad range of concerns and aspirations. These included career development, training, mentoring, communication, inclusive practice, wellbeing, physical workplace environments, workload, recognition, ethics, integrity, open research, leadership, and collaboration. For example, researchers raised concerns about access to appropriate workspace, recognition for diverse

contributions to research, support for international and migrant researchers, and the consistency of management and supervisory practice.

The breadth of issues directed towards I-REACCH suggested that ‘research culture’ was sometimes being used as a broad umbrella term for aspects of working life that researchers wished to see improved. At first glance, all of these can appear to sit comfortably within research culture. Each affects the experience of researchers and the conditions in which research takes place. However, when considered more closely, many of these issues are shaped by systems and relationships that extend beyond research-specific activity.

For example, career development may be discussed as part of research culture because it affects researchers’ progression, recognition, and sense of belonging. Yet career development is also shaped by organisational promotion frameworks, line management, workload allocation, HR processes, and institutional priorities. Similarly, wellbeing may be discussed in relation to research pressure, funding competition, publication expectations, and precarity. At the same time, wellbeing is also affected by organisational workload systems, local leadership, team relationships, communication norms, implementation of reasonable adjustments, and expectations about availability.

This raised an important question for the project team: when stakeholders asked I-REACCH to address an issue, were they asking for a research culture intervention, an organisational culture intervention, a team-level intervention, or some combination of all three? While institutional mechanisms already existed for many organisational and team-level concerns, there was often less clarity about how research culture issues should be addressed, and by whom.

The question was not merely semantic. It mattered because different kinds of issues require different kinds of action. A project team with two years of funding may be able to develop resources, convene conversations, pilot interventions, or influence institutional thinking. It may be less able to alter formal HR policy (although it can, of course, offer recommendations), change institutional structures, or reshape the working practices of every team. There were also influences that extended beyond the institution itself, including wider economic conditions, national policy, funding landscapes, and social factors that shape researchers’ ability to participate fully in research. While such factors may have a significant impact on researchers’ experiences, they often sit beyond the scope of institutionally based culture change initiatives. At the same time, a project that avoids these wider influences risks misunderstanding the sources of the problems it is trying to address.

The challenge, then, was not only to define research culture, but also to understand where responsibility for change sat within a complex institutional environment.

These discussions also highlighted an important distinction between influence and control. Some issues fell within the project’s direct sphere of influence and could be addressed through interventions, resources, conversations, or pilot activities (for example, initiatives to improve awareness of neurodiversity among managers and supervisors). Others required partnership with institutional services, senior leaders, departments, or research groups (for example, work relating to accessible research environments or support for migrant researchers). Still others lay largely outside the project’s control, despite having a significant impact on researchers’ experiences (for example, the provision of social space within

departments). Understanding who was best placed to influence a particular issue often proved just as important as deciding whether it related to research culture, organisational culture, team culture, or a combination of all three.

From categorisation to complexity

The model did not emerge fully formed. Early discussions between the authors of this paper focused primarily on the relationship between organisational culture and research culture. However, as we explored examples from practice, it became increasingly difficult to ignore the role of local teams, departments, and research groups in shaping researchers' lived experiences. Team culture therefore emerged not as an additional category for completeness, but as a response to the limitations of a two-domain model.

Figure 1 presents the resulting three-domain model, which was used as a heuristic to explore how culture-related issues might operate across research, organisational, and team contexts. For the purposes of this exercise, research culture referred broadly to research-specific norms and expectations; organisational culture to wider institutional systems and structures; and team culture to local working relationships and practices. It presents selected illustrative examples from a much broader range of issues that were considered.

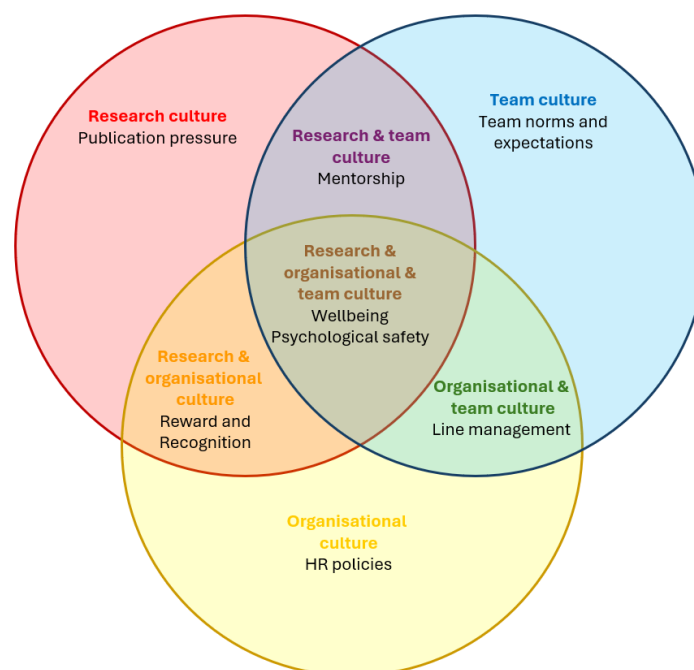


Figure 1. Heuristic model used to explore the relationships between research, organisational, and team culture. The examples shown are illustrative and are intended to support reflection on the interaction between cultural domains rather than provide definitive classifications.

In response to these questions, the I-REACCH core project team, responsible for the day-to-day delivery of the project, undertook a reflective exercise to map a range of culture-related issues against three domains: research culture, organisational culture, and team culture. The purpose was not to produce a final taxonomy, but to explore whether the distinction between these domains was useful in practice. Initially, the team expected the exercise to help clarify where different issues belonged. Instead, it revealed how difficult it was to place many topics within a single category. While some issues appeared to sit predominantly within one domain, discussions frequently returned to the overlap between domains, with

team members identifying multiple influences on almost every issue considered. The exercise proved more useful in exposing the interconnected nature of culture-related issues than in producing clear boundaries between them.

The team considered issues such as recognition and reward, research integrity, career development, communication, inclusion, psychological safety, workload, wellbeing, power dynamics, collaboration, leadership, mentorship, authorship, and research quality. Some issues initially appeared to sit clearly within one domain. Publication pressure, grant funding competitiveness, authorship norms, and disciplinary hierarchies appeared more closely associated with research culture. However, even these examples were influenced by wider disciplinary expectations, assessment frameworks such as REF, and local research practices.

HR processes, governance, institutional strategy, and organisational learning appeared more clearly connected to organisational culture. Day-to-day interactions, trust, local communication, role clarity, and shared team norms appeared to belong to team culture.

However, as the exercise developed, the apparent clarity began to break down. Many issues could plausibly be placed in more than one domain. Research integrity, for example, might initially be seen as a research culture issue, because integrity is central to the conduct and quality of research. Yet integrity is also shaped by organisational policies, reporting mechanisms, training, governance, and accountability processes, as well as team-level practice, including whether senior colleagues model good conduct and whether local norms encourage openness or discourage challenge. For example, a researcher considering whether to question a research practice may be influenced simultaneously by disciplinary expectations, institutional reporting processes, and the norms operating within their immediate team.

Similar patterns emerged across other topics. Inclusion and belonging were not only matters of institutional policy, nor only of research culture, nor only of team behaviour. They were shaped by all three. Psychological safety was experienced most directly in teams, but was influenced by organisational leadership, power structures, employment conditions, and disciplinary research norms. Workload and time pressures were shaped by research expectations, institutional processes, and local team practice. Wellbeing emerged from the interaction between research demands, organisational systems, and day-to-day working relationships.

The exercise therefore did not resolve the question of where each issue belonged. Instead, it revealed that the question itself was limited. The most useful insight was not that issues could be accurately sorted into separate categories, but that many of the issues most central to researchers' experiences sat in the overlap between categories.

In this sense, the exercise moved from categorisation to complexity. It showed that the act of trying to draw boundaries was useful precisely because it revealed how difficult those boundaries were to maintain.

Research culture, organisational culture, and team culture

The three-domain model that emerged from this work can be understood as a practical thinking tool rather than a fixed framework.

Research culture refers here to the norms, incentives, expectations, and practices associated specifically with research. The Royal Society defines research culture as the “behaviours, values, expectations, attitudes and norms of our research communities”, which influence researchers’ career paths and shape the way research is conducted and communicated (Royal Society, 2018, p.3; UKRI, 2024). Research culture therefore includes publication and citation pressures, grant funding competition, collaboration and competition, authorship practices, research integrity, open research, disciplinary norms, research autonomy, and expectations around impact and research quality.

Organisational culture refers to the wider institutional systems, structures, values, and ways of working that shape the experience of staff and students (Schein and Schein, 2016). These include leadership, governance, HR policies, promotion and reward frameworks, physical and digital infrastructure, administrative burden, communication systems, institutional strategy, and organisational readiness for change.

Team culture refers to the local cultures through which people experience work on a day-to-day basis (Edmondson, 1999). These include communication, trust, mutual support, role clarity, shared expectations, responsiveness to feedback, local leadership, and the emotional and social dynamics of working relationships.

While these distinctions are useful, they are not clean. Many of the issues that matter most to researchers sit at the intersection of research culture, organisational culture, and team culture. Inclusion, psychological safety, wellbeing, workload, power dynamics, flexibility, autonomy, voice, and influence are all shaped by the interaction of research-specific pressures, organisational systems, and team-level relationships and practices. Attempting to assign such issues to a single domain risks overlooking the multiple influences that shape how they are experienced in practice.

This has important implications for research culture work. If a project treats research culture as separate from organisational and team culture, it may misdiagnose the causes of the issues it is trying to address. Conversely, if a project treats all organisational and team issues as research culture issues, it may overextend its scope and create unrealistic expectations about what it can deliver.

A more useful approach may be to ask not “is this research culture?” but:

- How is this issue shaped by research-specific norms and incentives?
- How is this issue shaped by organisational structures and systems?
- How is this issue experienced and reproduced at team level?
- Which of these levels can a particular intervention realistically influence?
- Where might partnership with other institutional functions be needed?

This reframes research culture work as a process of understanding interactions, rather than assigning ownership. In this sense, it represents a shift towards a more relational approach,

focused on the relationships through which culture-related issues are experienced and enacted.

The missing level: team culture

One of the most important insights from the I-REACCH team's reflection was the significance of team culture. Discussions of research culture often focus on sector-level incentives or institutional systems. These are important, but they do not fully explain how researchers experience culture in practice.

For many researchers, culture is encountered most directly through immediate teams, supervisors, managers, principal investigators, peers, and local research groups (Edmondson, 1999). A university may have strong policies, well-developed resources, and clear statements of commitment, but local team culture can either support or undermine these. Conversely, researchers may experience positive team cultures even within wider systems that are pressurised, inconsistent, or difficult to navigate.

The reflective exercise initially sought to categorise culture-related issues within discrete domains. However, the resulting discussions suggested that researchers rarely experience research, organisational, and team culture as separate phenomena. Instead, these domains interact in ways that shape lived experience. Figure 2 presents a relational model that captures this interaction.

In this context, lived experience refers to how researchers encounter and make sense of culture through their day-to-day working lives. Researchers do not typically experience research culture, organisational culture, and team culture as separate domains. Rather, they experience the combined effects of policies, expectations, relationships, systems, opportunities, and constraints as they play out in practice. These interactions may be particularly complex for those who experience structural disadvantage, discrimination, exclusion, or barriers to participation, where different aspects of culture can reinforce or compound one another.

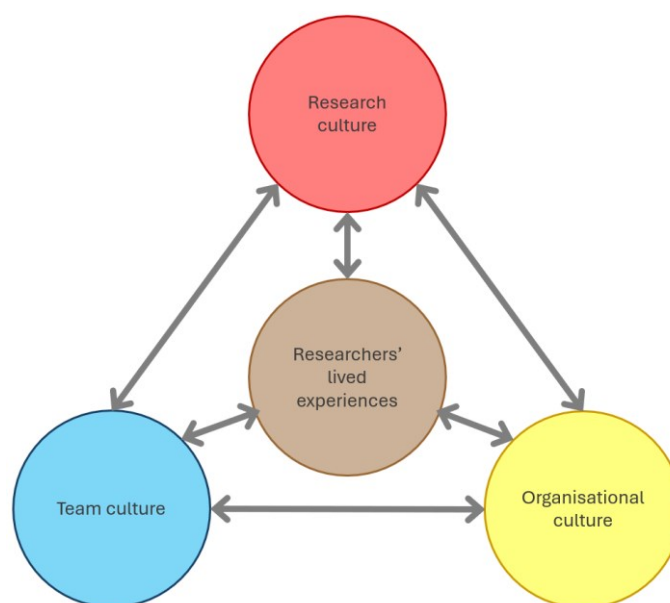


Figure 2. A relational model of culture in research environments. Researchers' lived experience is shaped by the interaction of research-specific norms and incentives, organisational systems and structures, and team-level relationships and practices.

This does not mean that team culture should be separated from organisational or research culture. Rather, team culture can be understood as one of the main sites where wider cultures are enacted. For example, institutional policies on inclusion, wellbeing, and career development depend on local interpretation and implementation. Research norms around authorship, collaboration, and integrity are often negotiated within teams. Power dynamics connected to funding, status, contract type, discipline, or career stage are experienced through everyday interactions.

The team level therefore acts as a bridge between institutional aspiration and lived experience. This may explain why research culture interventions that focus only on central policy, resources, or communications can have limited impact if they do not also engage with local practice.

For a research culture project, this creates both opportunity and challenge. Team-level work can be highly meaningful because it is close to people's everyday experiences. However, team cultures are also varied, dispersed, and shaped by histories, personalities, disciplines, hierarchies, and pressures that central projects cannot fully control. This makes team culture essential to research culture change, but difficult to address through institution-wide interventions alone.

Implications for culture change practice

The experience of I-REACCH suggests several practical implications for research culture initiatives.

First, research culture projects need to be **clear about scope without defining that scope too narrowly**. If the scope is too broad, projects may be expected to solve issues which sit largely outside their direct control. If the scope is too narrow, projects may fail to address the organisational and team-level conditions that shape researchers' experiences.

Second, mapping issues across research, organisational, and team culture can be a **useful reflective tool**. Its value lies less in deciding where each issue 'really' belongs and more in helping project teams, stakeholders, and leaders understand the different levels at which change may be needed.

Third, issues that sit in the overlap between domains may require **partnership rather than ownership**. A research culture project may have a role in convening, evidencing, influencing, or piloting, but lasting change may depend on collaboration with HR, Organisational Development, research support services, doctoral education, academic leadership, departmental leadership, local leaders, and teams.

The final two implications are particularly important. Fourth, the **overlap between domains can help explain why some research culture work feels difficult to progress**. A project may identify a problem as part of research culture, but the levers for change may sit elsewhere. For example, improving recognition may require changes to promotion processes, workload models, leadership practice, and local team norms, as well as a shift in research values.

Finally, research culture work may benefit from more **explicit attention to team culture**. If researchers experience culture most directly through teams, then interventions that support local reflection, leadership, communication, and shared expectations may be as important as institutional statements or central resources.

Discussion: research culture as relational and situated

The central learning from this reflective process is that the boundaries of research culture are difficult to define because researchers' experiences are shaped by multiple interacting cultures. This does not make the concept of research culture meaningless. Rather, it suggests that research culture should be understood as relational and situated.

The attempt to categorise issues was useful because it exposed the limitations of categorisation. It showed that some issues are research-specific, some are organisational, some are team-based, but most are a combination of all three. The question is therefore not only what belongs within research culture, but how research culture is produced through organisational systems and team-level practice.

Understanding research culture as relational and situated has implications for how institutions design, communicate, and evaluate research culture work. Perhaps the most important lesson from this work is that research culture initiatives operate within a wider system of organisational and team influences. If a research culture initiative is presented as the answer to every issue affecting researchers, it risks becoming overburdened and ineffective. If it is treated only as a set of research-specific activities, it risks missing the wider conditions that shape research environments. A more nuanced approach is needed, one that recognises the different levels at which culture is created, experienced, and changed.

This relational understanding of research culture also has implications for accountability. When researchers raise concerns about culture, they may not distinguish between the research system, the university as an organisation, and their immediate team environment. Nor should they necessarily be expected to. Their experience is whole, even if institutional responsibilities are divided. The task for culture change practitioners is therefore to translate lived experience into an understanding of where influence, responsibility, and action may sit.

For I-REACCH, the three-domain model became a way of making this translation more visible. It helped the project team think about what could be addressed directly, what required partnership, and what needed to be escalated or situated within wider institutional change. It also helped explain why many culture issues felt difficult: they were not located in one place.

The reflections presented here emerged from one institution and one culture change project. The intention is therefore not to offer a universally applicable framework, but to provide a practical lens through which others might examine the boundaries and interactions of culture within their own contexts.

Conclusion

This paper has reflected on the challenge of defining research culture from the perspective of a pilot university culture change project designed to test interventions and inform institutional change. It has argued that research culture is often used as a broad label for issues that are also shaped by organisational and team cultures. Through a reflective mapping exercise, the I-REACCH project team found that many issues did not sit neatly

within one domain. Instead, they occupied the overlap between research-specific norms, organisational systems, and team-level lived experience.

The value of the resulting model lies not in providing a definitive categorisation of culture-related issues – indeed, many individual items could plausibly be located in different domains depending on context – but in creating a structured way to explore how different layers of culture interact. Rather than providing definitive answers, it prompts better questions about how culture operates, where change is needed, and who needs to be involved.

For practitioners, the key insight is that research culture work cannot be understood only as work on research-specific behaviours, incentives, or practices. Nor can it be expected to resolve every organisational or team-level issue affecting researchers. Instead, research culture work requires careful attention to the interaction between these domains.

In attempting to define the boundaries of research culture, I-REACCH found that the boundaries were themselves part of the problem. Many of the issues that matter most to researchers arise precisely where research culture, organisational culture, and team culture collide. That collision may be where the most difficult work sits, but it may also be where the most meaningful culture change begins.

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About the authors

EMMA ANGELL is I-REACCH Project Manager, University of Leicester.

Role: Conceptualisation (equal), Investigation (equal), Visualisation (equal), Writing – original draft (lead), Writing – review and editing (equal).

ALEX GODDARD is Head of the Doctoral College and I-REACCH Co-Investigator, University of Leicester.

Role: Conceptualisation (equal), Investigation (equal), Visualisation (equal), Writing – review and editing (equal).

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Leicester Institute for Advanced Studies,
University of Leicester,
University Road,
Leicester,
LE1 7RH,
United Kingdom
le.ac.uk/research/institutes/lias
lias@leicester.ac.uk

