What is research culture? Interpreting and governing research culture in the UK

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Policy background

- The growing focus on 'research culture' in the UK and internationally
  - CoARA
  - DORA
  - Narrative CVs
- Funders increasingly focus on and fund initiatives aimed at research culture (e.g. Wellcome Trust, QR Funds)
- REF 2029 – People, Culture and Environment element
- Professionalisation and institutionalisation of research culture – units, RC leads/managers, strategies and action plans

But.. what IS research culture?

(Metaphysical) bowl of spaghetti

- Culture as material and symbolic
- Aspirational and reactive
- Not underpinned by a set of practices associated with 'doing research culture'

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→**Difficult epistemic and governable object**

→**Emergence of new 'audit'**

Research problem

- How do different actors and institutions understand the concept of research culture?
  - What types of tensions and contradictions emerge across the different meanings?
  - Is research culture an 'auditable object'?

Theoretical underpinnings

Theoretical framework: Framing and frames

- Goffman (1974): frames are schemata of interpretations through which the actors 'locate, perceive, identify and label' social reality.
  - Frames are central to the sense-making process (Weick, 1995)
- Strategic role of frames in building social movements (Benford & Snow, 2000; Klandermans, 1992; Snow, Rochford Jr, Worden, & Benford, 1986)

Theoretical framework: Framing and frames

- Frame analysis by Schön and Rein (1994, p. 146) sees frames as:

"ways of selecting, organizing, interpreting and making sense of complex reality to provide guideposts for knowing, analysing, persuading and acting"

- Frames are actionable – they are associated with practices and policy solutions
- Individual vs collective frames (Glaser, 2024)
- Frames can be ambiguous and still be productive (Dekker, 2017)
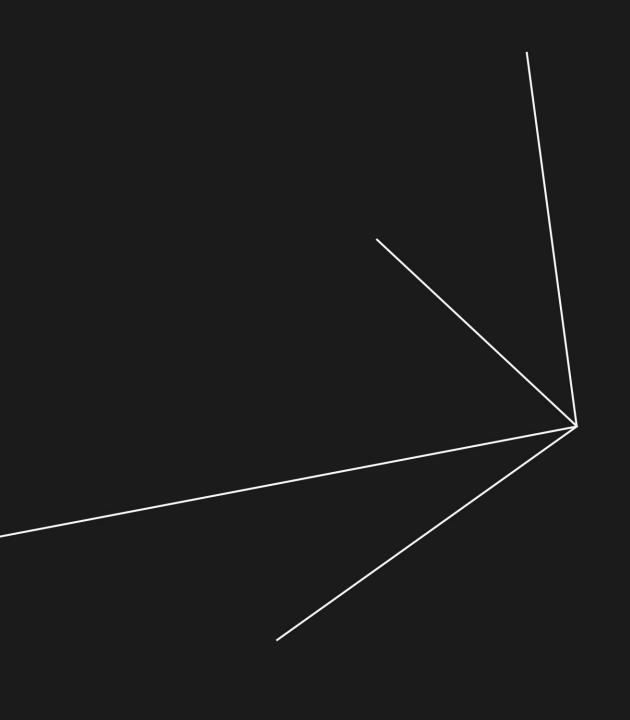
Theoretical framework: Emergence of audit

- Audit requires 'conditions of possibility' to emerge (Power, 2015)
  - Translation of an ambiguous policy object into an infrastructure of measurement
- Reactivity of measurement (Espeland and Saunders, 2007)
- Performativity of measures – engine not a camera (MacKenzie, 2008)

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→**This project captures research culture in the moment of pre-audit-ability**

→**Frames and measurement are co-produced**

Methods

Methods

1. Interviews with academics and professional services members from a research-intensive university (35)

2. 4 focus groups with academics in Engineering and Physical Sciences, Life and Environmental Sciences, Medicine and Health and Social Sciences

3. Interviews with 10 funders/decision-makers

4. Document analysis of key documents discussing 'research culture'

5. Institutional analysis of Russel Group universities

→ **Today: Highlight of the definitional struggles**

Making sense of research culture

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Research culture as new concept

- Research culture was a new term to the interviewees
  - All of the interviewees heard the term 'research culture' only within the last 5 years
  - The vast majority heard the terms for the first time in the last 2 years or less
  - Professional service members have a significantly clearer understanding of 'research culture'
- The most common contexts in which the term research culture was heard were:
  - REF 2029
  - Wellcome Trust report and funding
  - R&D People and Culture Strategy
  - **Not mentioned**: in the context of their work/research/collaborations, etc.
- Generally – discussed as difficult to understand, complex, elusive…

Academics are overwhelmed with so many different kinds of imperatives and agendas from the university and from funders all the time. Research culture is just another label to put over lots of things that they don't ever get to understand clearly as a single thing.

(Team Leader, Research Office)

What shapes research culture?

- Pandemic
- Research assessment
- Managers
- Physical spaces
- Colleagues
- Broader academic field
- Institution
- The VC
- Metrics

- Competition
- Available funds/resources
- Big scandals in science
- REF
- Demographics
- Power relations
- Traditions
- Relationships
- Funding

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Sense making

- **Sense-making from concept formulation**
  - The Royal Society definition was the most often discussed one
- **Sense-making through professionalisation**
  - From initial secondments to dedicated positions
- **Sense-making through comparison**
  - Innovators such as University of Glasgow
- **Sense-making through audit**
  - REF as a formulation of research culture

Sense-making through REF

I don't want to sound like a super cynic, because I'm not coming from like a really cynical place on it, but more of a pragmatic point of view, of thinking it doesn't really matter that I create some kind of idea or have some preconception of what it [research culture] means. At some point, I'm going to be told what it means to me in my place of employment, and at that point, I'll just be like, 'OK, fine, that's what it means now'. And we'll kind of go from there.

(Geosciences, senior lecturer)

Deficit model of culture

- **Implicitly** – ALL of the interviewees discussed the research culture in terms of problems or shortcomings of the existing research culture

- **Explicitly** – some saw the deficit model as a risk as it would shape the funders' and institutions' approaches to just focusing on the shortcomings

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→ **Negative framing process - framings of research culture are directly linked to the question of 'what is missing'**

Deficit model of culture

If you think about culture just generally, it's normally mentioned as something that people want to preserve in quite a small 'c' conservative way. And any notion of culture-changing is seen by some as wonderful and progressive and by others as bad and scary. Do you think the same things translate into research culture? We'll end up with a deficit model around things that will be perceived as desirable, and it becomes 'you need more of this, so tick the box to get that in'.

(Life sciences focus group)

Research culture as an umbrella

- Meaning of culture: Research culture is an umbrella term capturing a variety of practices/initiatives (research integrity, reward and recognition, EDI, interdisciplinarity and impact, early career researcher issues, working environment, etc.)
    - Composite view of research culture
- The problem:
    - There are challenges associated with each of these dimensions
    - Issues happening on different scales – they could be on team level, department level, field-level etc.
- It is too big to define and capture, too complex to be governable
- Diffused responsibility

Research culture as an umbrella

And then the Wellcome report kind of allowed us to bring some of that together and start to reflect on well what are we doing more broadly and how does the researcher development agenda and other things like research integrity and EDI, how do those all start to kind of blend into one and how might they come under a more kind of useful complementary umbrella.

(Professional services)

EDI 'capture'

People have tended to bundle research culture and EDI together quite closely, and I think that can be problematic because EDI is such an important multidimensional thing on its own that needs a separate space to unpack, which is what the university has been doing. The use the terms interchangeably hss its problems, because either people just assume that you're talking about EDI and therefore don't give enough attention to the other elements of research culture, or it all just gets kind of muddled.

(Social science, focus group)

→**The risk of de-politicisation of EDI**

Research culture as research

- Meaning of culture: what and how do we research
  - Epistemic view of research culture
- The problem:
  - research integrity, competition, lack of security, lack of creativity/innovation, the narrow meaning of 'excellence'
  - The key challenge is to 'fix' research practices
- Governing through research assessment

Research culture as research

For me it's the environment that we work in and how that enables and encourages and facilitates research. The message we often get is, you know, research culture is just about giving everyone a hug, making people feel good, which is really disappointing because it's not about making everyone feel warm and fuzzy. It's about a shared understanding of what excellence looks like and then practically making this a place where that can happen for everybody.

(Research culture lead, Medicine)

Research culture as means to an end

- Meaning of research culture: Research culture is what enables desired outcomes
  - Instrumentalist view of research culture
- The problem:
  - Existing research cultures are a barrier to types of creativity and innovations that enable big grant capture.
  - Research culture is required by the funders
  - Presented as a managerial challenge/constraint

Means to an end

- "I used to work as a [theme lead] and part of my job was analysis of different directions and opportunities. We soon realised that you cannot win the grants – especially the large-scale investments, without considering the issues that are now referred to as research culture. So, in a way, it became a part of my job.

(Manager, research office)

Research culture as a set of relationships

- Meaning of research culture: relationships and interactions between researchers within their fields
  - People-centred view of culture
- The problem:
  - Some aspects of academia are damaging to these relationships (e.g. overwork, competition)
  - Difficult to sustain and scale up
  - Both positive and negative relationships are reproduced across different 'agoras'
  - Un-governable?

People-centred culture change

Our field had been for a while, by good fortune for us, dominated by a small number of groups, most of whom were in Britain, a few of whom were in the States, all of whom were good friends and we shared an enormous amount of information. I went to a meeting in California about fifteen years ago and the last speaker - because it's a field that started small, had grown enormous and it was gathering people from other fields - the last speaker at that meeting was a woman none of us had ever seen before [...]. She opened her talk by standing up and saying, 'This meeting is extraordinary; I've never been anywhere before where so many people were talking about unpublished results'.

(Medicine focus group)

Discussion

- Research culture as an incomplete frame (cf. Dekker, 2017) – definitions are not agreed upon, but the strategies are being put in place

- Tensions and contradictions across the frames
  - Improving research excellence vs improving working lives
  - Visible vs Invisible
  - REF as a driver vs REF as a barrier
  - Research culture vs EDI

- Gap between the frames – e.g. people-centred and excellence-centred understandings (i.e. their practices, values, theories of change)

Discussion

- Complexity without one dominant frame – 'conditions of possibility' driven by policy/political ideas
  - The 'window of opportunity' makes things open to entrepreneurs (Royal Society)
  - Risk of 'reactivity' to REF – the field will be standardised by REF definition
- The risk of research culture becoming a managerial tool
  - Scope for disciplinary politics
  - Role of societies

Thank you!

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