

Academic Boundaries and the Impact Agenda for Academic Research

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REF2021 Research Excellence Framework

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About the REF

The REF is the UK's system for assessing the quality of research in UK higher education institutions. It first took place in 2014. The next exercise will be conducted in 2021.

REF2014 Research Excellence Framework

The research of **154 UK universities** was assessed

They made **1,911** submissions including:

- **52,061** academic staff
- **191,150** research outputs
- **6,975** impact case studies

REF Impact: ‘an effect on, change or benefit to the economy, society, culture, public policy or services, health, the environment or quality of life, beyond academia’.

Jarratt Report (1985)

Report of the Steering Committee for Efficiency Studies in Universities

Committee of Vice-Chancellors and Principals

[title page]

Committee of Vice Chancellors and Principals

“We recommend ... bring[ing] planning, resource allocation and accountability together into one corporate process ... Recognising the Vice-Chancellor not only as academic leader but also as chief executive of the university.”

March 1985

The Dearing Report (1997)

Higher Education in the learning society

Main Report

London: Her Majesty's Stationery Office 1997

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“Higher education has benefited greatly during the last decade from the ... leadership of its vice chancellors and principals. Their achievements have had insufficient recognition.

...our long term vision is one of autonomous institutions taking increasing responsibility for determining their own futures.”



Lambert Review of Business-University Collaboration

Final Report

“Business is critical of what it sees as the slow-moving, bureaucratic and risk-averse style of university management. However, there have been significant changes for the better in recent years. ...Many universities are ... delegating authority out of committees and into the hands of ...managers ... appointing more professional ... staff often from the private sector... Other universities should follow this lead”

Boundaries, freedom and agency

- What do we mean by autonomy/freedom? (Wright, 2016)
What do we mean by the university? (Bacevic, 2019)
- The power to define, claim, enact and set limits on ‘freedom’;
‘Who’, ‘what’ and ‘where is the agency’ of universities?
– these are precisely what is at stake.
- Impact: An enactment of whose agency? Promotes/impinges freedom?
- Wright (2016) & Bacevic (2019) explore boundary controversies
- Boundaries depend upon agency (Bacevic)
- Possibility of ‘liveable ... inter-species collaboration’ (Wright)
- ***How are boundaries confronted/crossed without being undermined?***

Theory of (academic) boundaries

- Boundaries grounded in power; power is created through boundaries:
 - ‘power always operates to produce dislocations ... in social space’ (Bernstein, 2000)
 - Institutions need a ‘boundary-creating self-conception’ (Considine, 2006)
- But boundaries never absolute (Bernstein, 2000)
 - *‘even ... the “ivory tower” must be understood in terms of interaction, not ... an illusory independence’ (Berger & Duguet, 1982)*
 - Even in its most strongly bounded form, universities depend on societal relations
- Boundaries are devices for *regulating* relations (Bernstein, 2000)
 - e.g. between categories (of group, agents, institution, activity, knowledge)
- Reproduction of boundaries depends not on avoiding all external relations, but *regulating* or ‘controlling’ relations.

Control over boundary relations/transactions

- *Control* refers to forms that relations take (Bernstein)
 - ‘High control’ vs. ‘low control’ approach to regulating relations e.g:
 - Symbolic: ‘Ivory tower’ vs. Entrepreneurial university
 - Curriculum / Graduates: Discipline based vs. Skills based
 - Publications: Technical/esoteric vs. lay/popular, user-focused
- Different approaches to regulating relations
 - ‘High control’ risks loss of relevance
 - ‘low control’ risks loss of distinctiveness and unique identity
- Boundary-crossing relations as ‘boundary transactions’
 - benefit wider society
 - Ideally also advance academic missions; enact academic values/identity
 - demonstrate what is distinctive & distinctively valuable

Study: boundary transactions in the context of the Impact Agenda

Sampling

- 10 STEMM departments with high REF2014 impact ratings (100% 3*-4*)
- range of disciplines (basic, applied; different branches of science)
- 7 departments in pre-1992 institutions, 3 from post-1992 institutions

Data

- 345 documents:
 - 26 Impact Case Studies – underpinned by **n=19** programmes of research
 - ~150 research outputs (articles, book chapters, patents)
 - 20 other departmental REF documents (Impact & Environment Templates)
 - ~150 other: institutional webpages; media reports & press releases; grant proposals
- 10 personalised, in-depth interviews (representing 19/26 Impact Case Studies; 14/19 programmes of research)

REF Impact Case Study example

Institution: University of Sheffield
Unit of Assessment: 25 - Education
Title of case study: Developing Higher Education in Further Education Colleges
1. Summary of the impact A twelve-year programme of research (2001-12) led by Professor Gareth Parry on higher education in further education colleges has produced impacts on policy development, institutional strategy and professional practice in England. The beneficiaries are the central authorities for higher and further education, the colleges of further education and their university partners, college managers and tutors, and thereby students and employers. The types of impact are changes to national funding and reporting arrangements; enhancements to policy and organisational learning; and contributions to institutional capacity-building. The vehicles for achieving impact are collaborations with policy, professional and practitioner communities through expert programmes, consultancies, databases, directories and guides to good practice. The reach of the impact is national, cross-sector and institutional, with a wider influence on debates across the UK and international developments including in Australia.

2. Underpinning research The research is the first to chart and analyse the contemporary contribution of further education colleges to English higher education. The findings assess the distinctiveness of this provision and the extent to which it has stimulated institutional diversity and wider access. Explanations are given for why growth in the size and share of higher education in the college sector – a goal of successive governments since 1997 – has not been achieved. The overall argument is that the structures of a two-sector system of further and higher education exercise a decisive, often contradictory, influence on efforts to build a larger role for colleges in higher education. The underpinning research was supported by five grants awarded by national agencies. All the research was based at Sheffield. It is the main body of academic work on this part of English higher education. In each study, the major user groups were partners in the conduct of the research. This work led, in turn, to follow-up projects funded by user organisations. (1) The college contribution to higher education targets, 2001-02 Funded by the Learning and Skills Development Agency (LSDA), the research used documentary sources to trace the policy history of higher education in colleges. It analysed administrative data to identify patterns of provision and funding. The findings highlighted inconsistency and ambiguity in public policy arising from one sector being accorded lead responsibility for the higher education

3. References to the research R1. Parry G and Thompson A (2002) <i>Closer by Degrees. The Past, Present and Future of Higher Education in Further Education Colleges</i> . London: Learning and Skills Development Agency, 86pp (research publication arising from peer reviewed funding from the Learning and Skills Development Agency). R2. Parry G (2003) Mass Higher Education and the English: Wherein the Colleges?, <i>Higher Education Quarterly</i> , 57 (4), pp 308-337. doi: 10.1111/j.0951-5224.2003.00250.x R3. Parry G (ed) (2009) Special Issue on The College Contribution to English Higher Education: International and Contextual Commentaries, <i>Higher Education Quarterly</i> , 63 (4), pp 319-433. R4. Rashid S, Parry G, Thompson A and Brooks G (2011) <i>Patterns of Further and Higher Education in Colleges and Universities in England: A Statistical Summary and Technical Commentary</i> . Bristol: HEFCE, 89pp. http://www.hefce.ac.uk/rdreports/2011/rd04_11 (research publication arising from peer reviewed research funding from HEFCE). R5. Parry G, Callender C, Scott P and Temple P (2012) <i>Understanding Higher Education in Further Education Colleges</i> , BIS Research Paper 69. London: Department for Business, Innovation and Skills, 219pp. http://www.bis.gov.uk/assets/biscore/higher-
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4. Details of the impact Shaping national policy The research has contributed to revisions of policy, changes in implementation, assessments of progress, and challenges and changes to the thinking of national bodies. The direct beneficiaries were HEFCE, the Learning and Skills Council (LSC), BIS and the Association of Colleges. As a result of the enhanced capability of these organisations in a hitherto underdeveloped area of policy, choices for students have improved and partnerships between colleges and universities have been better supported. The core recommendations of the 2002-03 research were accepted by HEFCE and, following a review in 2005-06, implemented as sector policy [S1]. The measures adopted included 'a minimum

5. Sources to corroborate the impact S1. The Head of Funding at HEFCE can corroborate the adoption of the recommendations of the 2002-03 research and the operational benefits arising from subsequent follow-up projects. S2. The Head of Qualifications at the Skills Funding Agency can corroborate the contributions to cross-sector policy learning and understanding. S3. The Policy Exchange report (2011) shows the central place of research by Parry in contemporary policy debates on the higher education mission of colleges. S4. The LSIS guide (2009) shows the translation of research findings into guidance for governors. S5. The benefits to institutional planning and professional development in Australia can be corroborated by the Director of Policy and Stakeholder Engagement at TAFE Directors

Five forms of boundary transaction

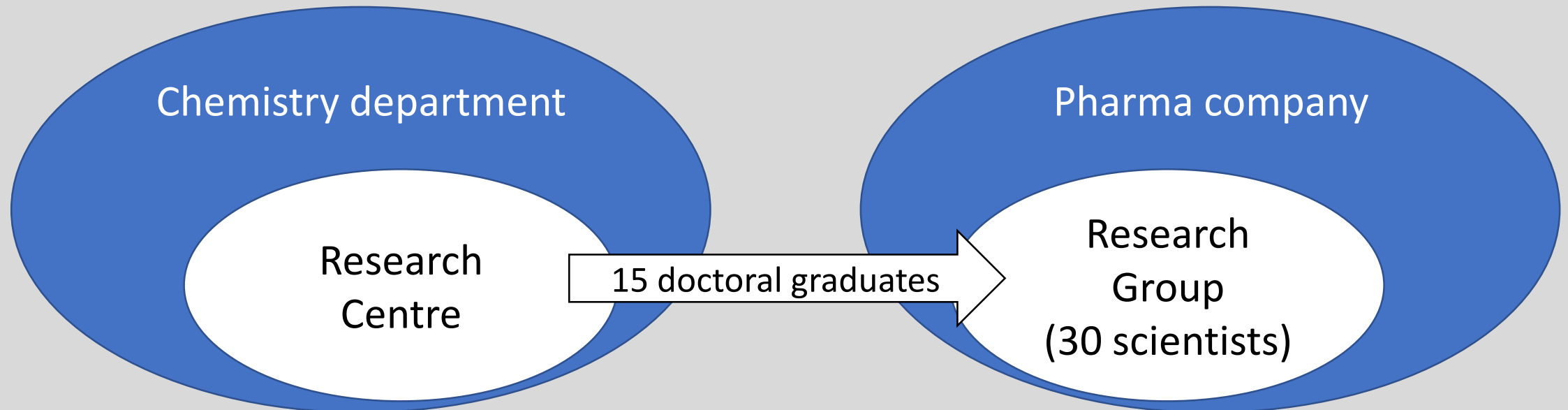
Boundary transaction form	Frequency (n=19 programmes of research)	Examples
Boundary structure	16	'Problem focused' research units; Start-ups; Industry consortia; Networks
Boundary-spanning	13	Students, Graduates, Staff, moving between academic and non-academic contexts
Outreach	12	Participation in & generation of networks with users, sponsors, beneficiaries, stakeholders
Collaboration	11	Co-produced research (with non-academic)
User-focused output	11	Reports/articles (depending on audience), workshops, technologies

Boundary structure: Industry consortia in two contexts ('high' & 'low' control)

	Example 1 (Chemistry)	Example 2 (Engineering)
Industry	Private sector utilities	Private sector utilities
Mechanism	Membership- based consortium	Membership- based consortium
Recruitment	Very long process	All companies “eager to join”
Control	Lower: Industry scientist appointed as professor & co-director	High: “The onus is on you to come to us”

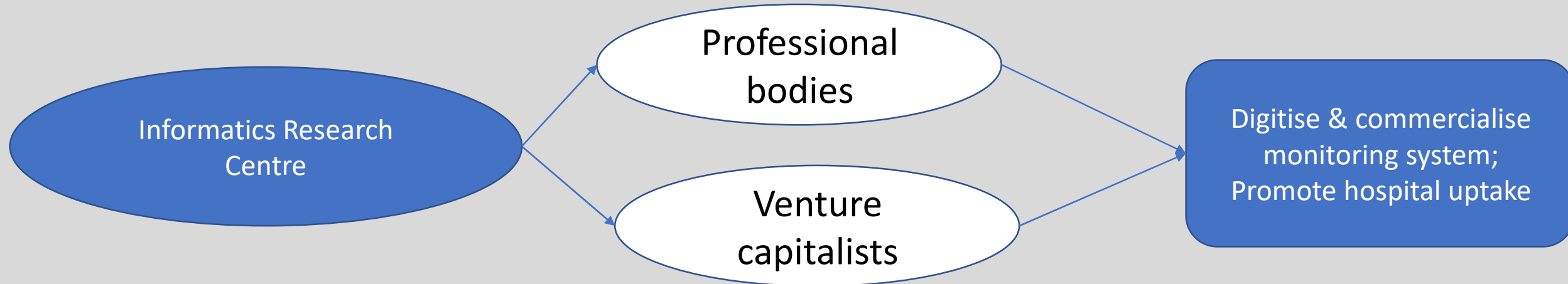
Example: Boundary-spanning

- Chemistry
- Departmental impact: financial returns and health benefits
- Research centre specialises in specific approach to pharmaceutical development
- Impact realised through doctoral graduates moving to industry



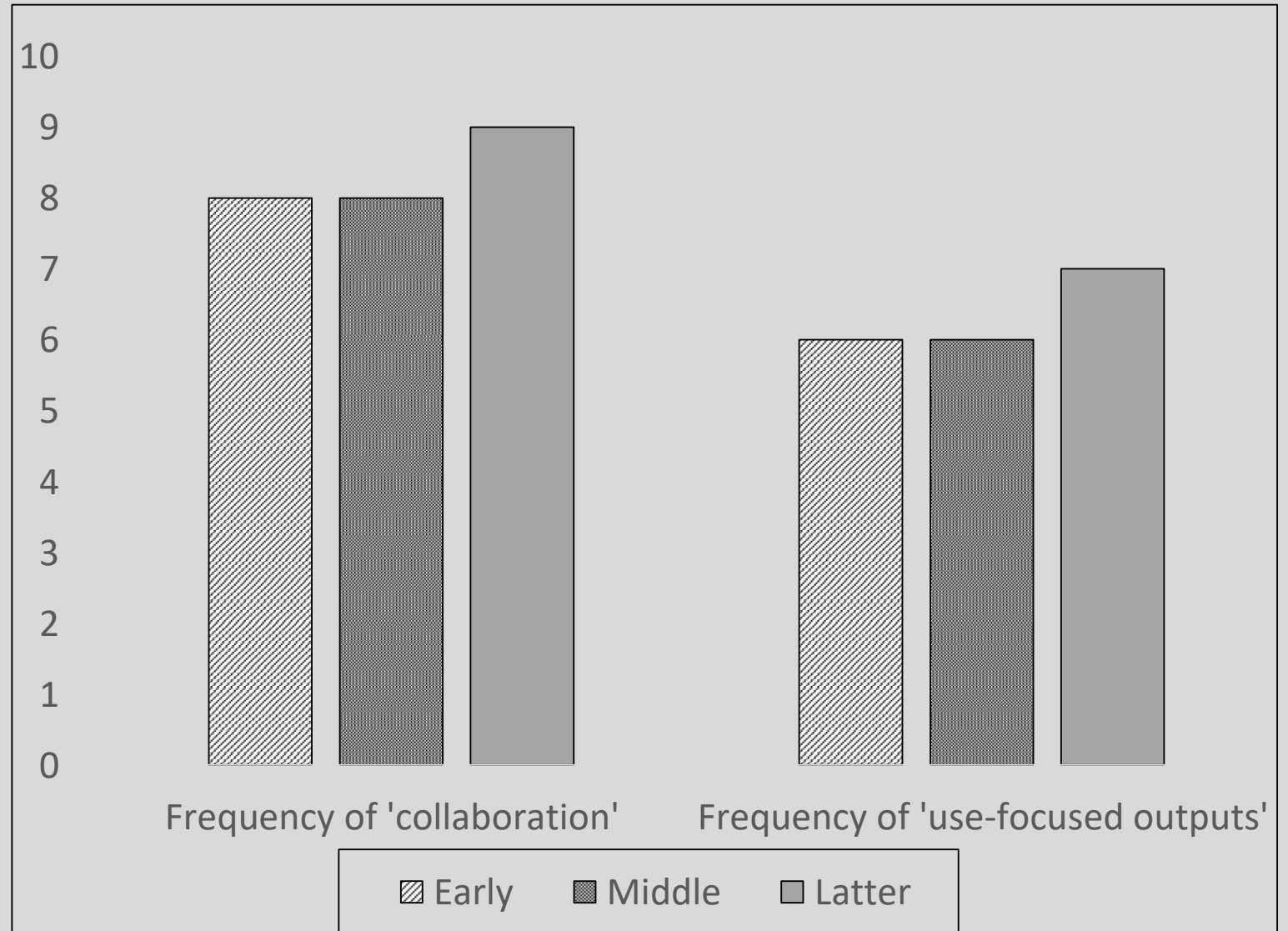
Example: Outreach

- Computer Science & Informatics
- Departmental impact: Health monitoring & benchmarking outcomes; financial return
- Research centre a 'boundary structure', linking computer scientists and health experts
- 'Outreach' – very different types of networking...

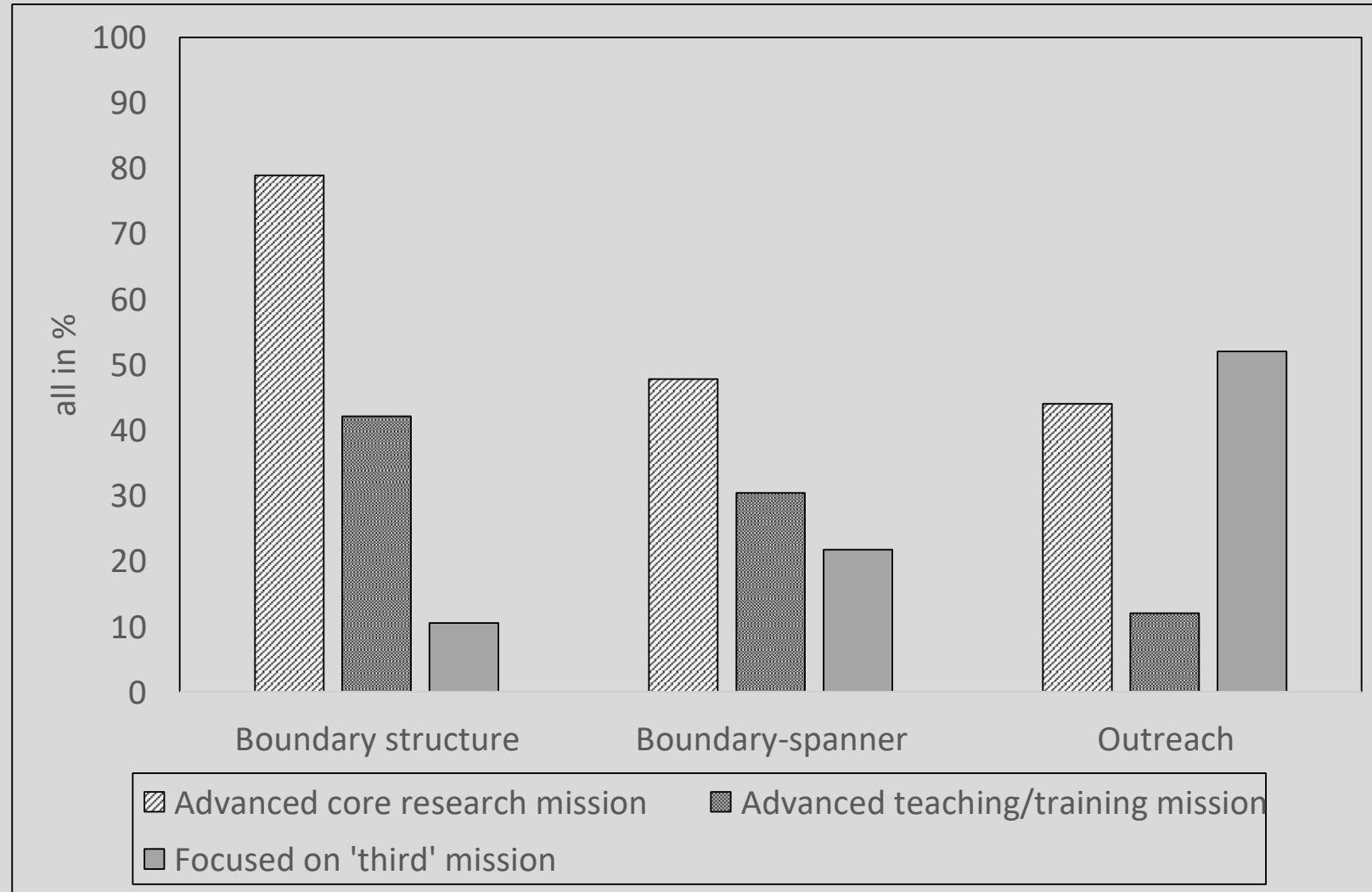


Indicators of effectiveness of transactions: temporal indicator

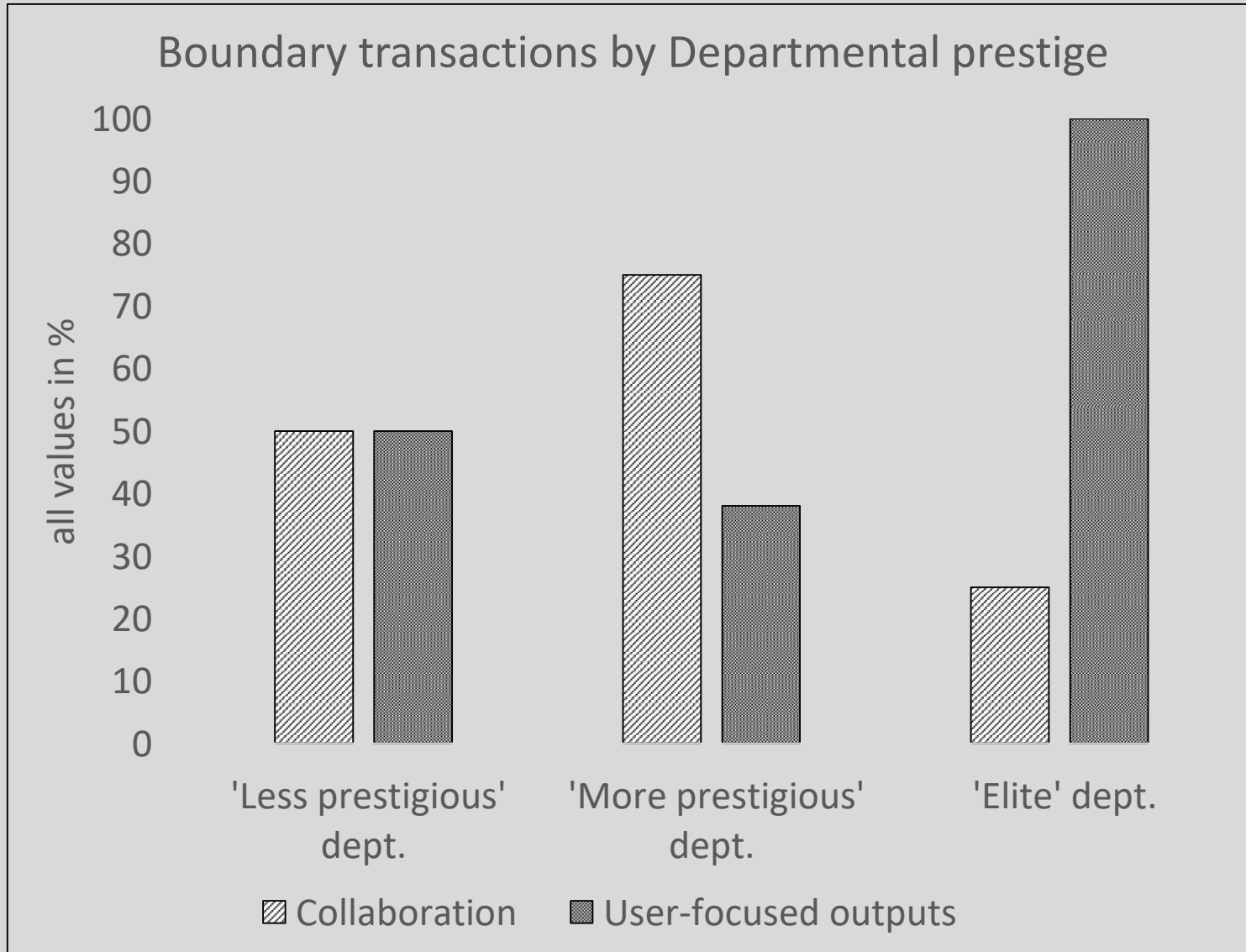
- 'Collaboration' & 'Use-focused outputs'
- steady throughout 'early', 'middle' and 'latter' stages of research
- Suggests that they can be fundamental



Indicators of effectiveness of transactions: multiple functions of transactions



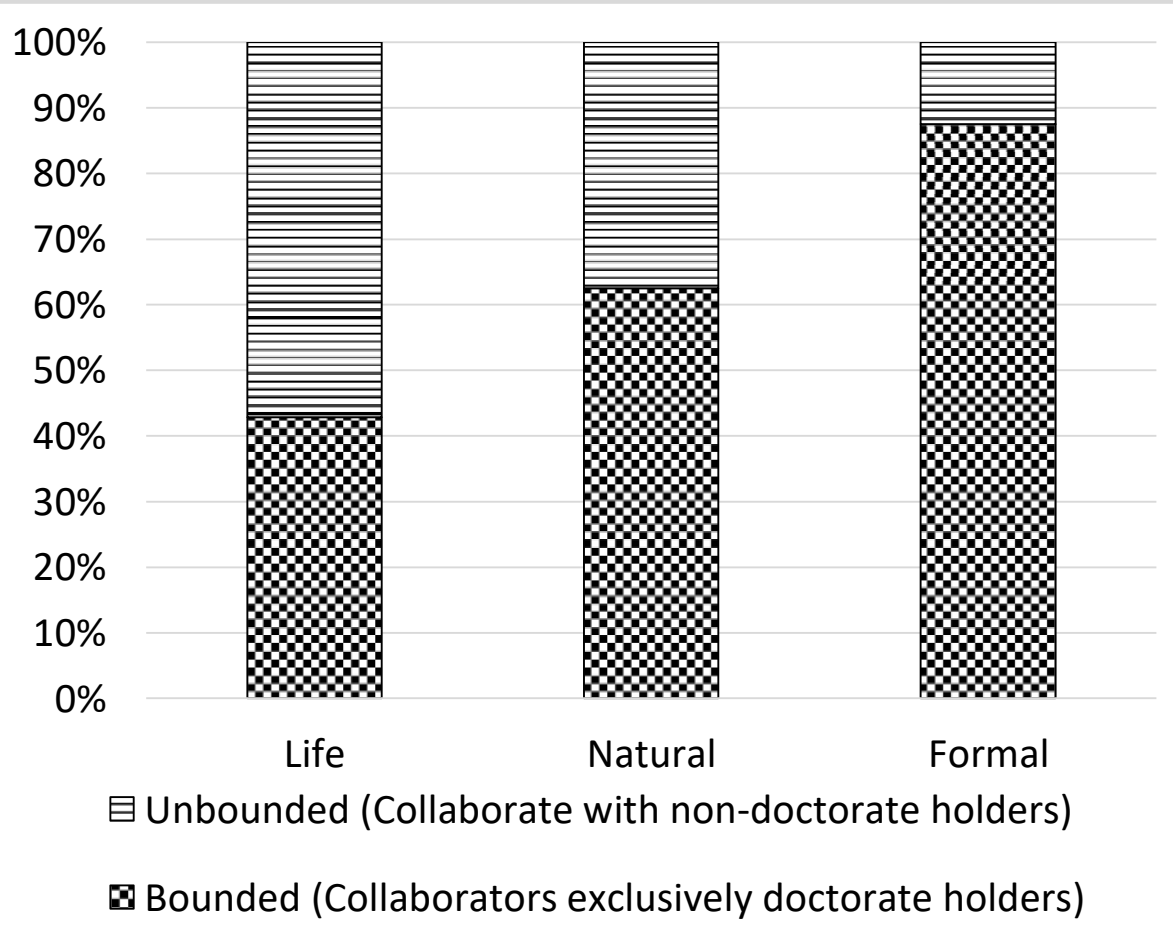
Context variation: Departmental prestige



Elite departments:

- Less frequently collaborate
- Prefer to 'transact' via their outputs
- May indicate greater capacity to control/regulate boundaries?

Context variation: Branch of science



'Low-cost' transactions for Formal scientists

“Most if not all of the particular group that we worked with had PhDs ... so they would understand the ... university and the mode of operation if you like.” (Formal scientist)

“I think the ... challenges of working with industry are manageable... I don't find any issues.” (Formal scientist)

Summary of boundary transactions

- Academia often can control boundary transactions/regulate boundaries
- But even 'symbiotic' relations may advance interests unequally
- Boundary transactions often with already powerful actors:
 - Certain governmental bodies
 - Large industry (defence, pharmaceutical, energy/utilities)
 - Vast majority of non-academic collaborators held PhDs
- Some departments cede greater control over research & transactions
 - Reinforces sector hierarchies; differential regulatory power/control
 - Affects (PhD) students – expected to benefit uni & external interests

Concluding remarks

- Boundary transactions – mechanisms for reproducing/re-legitimizing academic boundaries and identities during ‘inter-species’ interaction
- But even ‘symbiotic’ relations may advance interests unequally
- PBRF pushing unis to more ‘costly’ transactions and ceding control over research & transactions to powerful external interests
- Reinforces sector hierarchies; differential regulatory power/control
- Affects (PhD) students – expected to benefit uni & external interests