

## Conceptualisations of research in research assessment and research careers

Xin Xu<sup>1</sup>, Alis Oancea<sup>1</sup>, Gemma Derrick<sup>2</sup>, James Robson<sup>1</sup>, Maria Rucsandra Stan<sup>3</sup>, Antonin Charret<sup>1</sup>, Soyoung Lee<sup>1</sup>, McQueen Sum<sup>1</sup>, Szilvi Watson<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup>University of Oxford, Oxford, United Kingdom. <sup>2</sup>University of Bristol, Bristol, United Kingdom. <sup>3</sup>Università Carlo Cattaneo - LIUC, Castellanza, Italy

### Research Domains

Academic practice, work, careers and cultures (AP)

### Abstract

This paper presents findings from an ongoing project on ‘The role of research and research assessment in higher education’ (2021-23), which is part of the ESRC-funded Centre for Global Higher Education (CGHE). In this paper, we focus on one strand of the research project. It compares and discusses the role of research and research assessment in academic careers in England, Norway, Italy, Hong Kong SAR, Australia and New Zealand.

The paper draws on interviews conducted in 2022 with key stakeholders across different sectors and from various backgrounds in the six research systems. It presents various conceptualisations of *research*, and how these conceptualisations are performed through research assessment and lived in research careers. The research aims to provide conceptual, empirical and practical contributions not only to the research-on-research field, but also to higher education and research systems in different contexts.

# Full paper

## Introduction

This paper presents findings from an ongoing project on ‘The role of research and research assessment in higher education’ (2021-23), which is part of the ESRC-funded Centre for Global Higher Education (CGHE). In this paper, we focus on one strand of the research project. It compares and discusses conceptualisations of research in research assessment and research careers in England, Norway, Italy, Hong Kong SAR, Australia and New Zealand.

## Research context and research questions

Contemporary academia is not an ‘ivory tower’ separated from the ‘outside world’. Various factors and stakeholders influence how the academic world functions, what academic life looks like, and how academic careers unfold.

For example, research assessment exercises and performance-based funding schemes are powerfully shaping the understandings and practices of research, by stakeholders like governments, publishers, funders, universities, academics, and administrators around the world (Hicks, 2012; Jonkers & Zacharewicz, 2016; Oancea, 2019). The nexus between research and teaching also influences academic career and identity in higher education (Geschwind & Broström, 2015; Hattie & Marsh, 1996; Huang, 2018). The ‘impact agenda’ and ‘third mission’ entangle with academic careers more closely than ever (Compagnucci & Spigarelli, 2020; Watermeyer, 2015). Tensions on academic freedom, agency and autonomy are never-ending (Vähäsantanen et al., 2020). Inequalities, injustice, and precarity in global academia persist and are exacerbated during the COVID-19 pandemic (Kınıkoğlu & Can, 2021; Pereira, 2021).

In the context of these changing and unchanging dynamics, this paper addresses the following questions:

1. How is *research* conceptualised over different levels and contexts of the research system?
2. How are different conceptualisations of *research* performed through research assessment?

### 3. What are the implications of this performative enactment for research careers?

This paper aims to contribute to the field of research on research in the following ways:

- Conceptually, it contributes to the conceptual underpinning of *research* and *researchers* with empirical evidence and dialogues with extant scholarship.
- Empirically, it reflects on new empirical evidence and systematic and comparative analysis from fieldwork conducted across different disciplines, institutions and research systems.
- It aims to provide more diverse perspectives on the meanings associated with research and on their cultural rootedness.

## Methodology

We draw on a thematic analysis of empirical data collected from interviews mainly in England, Norway, Italy, Hong Kong, Australia and New Zealand. As of June 2022, we have interviewed more than 60 stakeholders in higher education and research sectors across these systems and beyond. Participants include leadership from ministries and other government agencies, research assessment agencies, data and publishing industry, research funders, unions, academies, etc. In addition, we are conducting interviews with stakeholders at 12 case universities across the six systems. Participants are from various disciplines, including department heads, senior research administrators, senior and early-career academics. Interviews are conducted in multiple languages. Interviews are ongoing, with the plan to further complete 120 interviews in the summer of 2022.

## Emerging findings

The interviews made clear the diverse conceptualisations of *research* among different voices, sectors and contexts. However, one central common element is that most participants relate their conceptualisation of *research* with *knowledge*.

We have identified five types of definitions of *research* from the interviews: descriptive or lexical; persuasive; operational; and

stipulative. Across the different types, the definitions include combinations of, largely, the following elements: (1) drivers of research, such as discussing research as driven by curiosity, problems or challenges; (2) process of research, highlighting systematic inquiry, processes of discovery and investigation, or specific practices and behaviours; and (3) outcomes of research, such as the advancement and betterment of knowledge, originality, impacts and applications.

Participants also highlighted distinctions across different types of *research*. While the 'basic - applied research' spectrum was central to many descriptions of research, occasionally with critical caveats, participants also discussed disciplinary and inter/multidisciplinary dynamics in research, research in different sectors, and research with different ontological, epistemological and methodological bases. They also commented on the limitations of these and other distinctions (such as theoretical vs practice-based research) and on the limitations inherent to the terminology currently in use in research funding, administration and governance. Some of other key terms entangled with definitions of *research* include: science, innovation, impact, R&D research and development, research integrity, research quality, research excellence, researchers, research ecosystem.

We will conclude the paper with insights from interviews with participants at different stages of their research career in the six contexts. We will also reflect on the implications for research careers of increasing diversity and cultural rootedness of conceptualisations of *research*, as used in research assessment.

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