

Giving voice to the community: Co-creating a framework for research culture change

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Abstract

Cultivating a positive research culture requires effective leadership that operates collegially. However, a gap remains in our understanding of how this collegial leadership manifests in practice. The InFrame project, a Wellcome Trust funded collaboration between the Universities of Edinburgh, Glasgow, and St Andrews, aims to catalyse a transformative shift in research culture through the cultivation of effective collegial leadership.

Through piloting an accessible Culture Catalyst Fund (CCF), which will provide funding opportunities for new and emerging leaders to investigate their practice, InFrame will develop a co-created framework for collegial leadership.

Delving into empirical data collected during the initial round of the CCF and employing a combination of thematic analysis, culturally responsive theory-driven evaluation and a social constructivist approach, this paper will contribute to addressing the gap in our understanding of how leaders can foster positive cultures within the Higher Education sector, while minimising the risk of duplication in existing initiatives.

Full paper

Effective research thrives in a supportive and inclusive environment that recognises, rewards, and values contributions (UUK, 2019). This crucial element, often termed 'research culture,' encompasses the behaviours, values, expectations, attitudes, and norms within our research communities (Royal Society, 2025). Furthermore, identifying, rewarding and fostering successful examples of collegial leadership within institutions can be challenging. There is a risk of overlooking or duplicating existing initiatives, hindering the potential for widespread positive impact and systemic culture change.

A central objective of the InFrame project is to broaden understanding of research leadership through providing funding opportunities for new and emerging leaders to investigate their practice. To achieve this, the project has developed and is currently piloting an accessible Culture Catalyst Fund (CCF), which will be used to develop an emerging co-created framework for collegial leadership. The CCF was initially guided by three key themes identified through an analysis of prevailing institutional culture trends: 'putting policy into practice', 'changing what counts', and 'setting the tone'. However, as the CCF progressed, a richer understanding of the research culture emerged, with aspiring leaders highlighting a broader spectrum of resources and activities that research communities deem essential for nurturing effective collegial leadership.

This paper draws upon a qualitative research approach to collect and analyse data from project applications across the three universities. 53 applications were submitted across the three institutions for the first round of the CCF, which closed on 17 January 2025.

Grounded theory (Ackerly and True, 2020; Lim, 2019) informed the data collection and analysis. 131 expressions of interest (EOIs) were recorded by the team of Community Knowledge Analysts prior to the CCF deadline. Concurrently, a literature review was conducted throughout the application process. This served two purposes: to support applicants in developing a robust evidence base for their proposals and to ensure that project ideas were adequately substantiated and validated. This approach also prioritised the processual and subjective nature of knowledge generation.

A culturally responsive theory-driven (Meyer et al, 2021) approach guided the application process, encompassing: information events (workshops, drop-in sessions, and a formal launch), responsive surgeries, translation and communication of identified trends and InFrame aims, and 1:1 meetings and brainstorming sessions. This approach ensured that the needs and perspectives of potential applicants were considered throughout the process.

A social constructivist approach (Charmaz and Thornberg, 2021; Kim, 2014) was adopted to prioritise grounded definitions and concepts that foreground applicants' lived experiences. Data were collected from the following components of the application forms: a 300-word project summary, a CCF theme summary (200 words), and a 1,600-word project plan, including overall aims, a section on "living the culture we want to create," and details on anticipated outcomes, outputs, and legacy. The length and structure of the application form, combined with the data collected from the EOIs, meetings and workshops, yielded a rich dataset from a broad representative sample.

Peer debriefing sessions were conducted with the Evaluation Manager and Community Knowledge Analysts across the three institutions to integrate diverse institutional perspectives into the analytical process. Thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke, 2023; Lim, 2023) was employed to analyse the collected data. Data were inductively coded, allowing

codes and themes to emerge and evolve from the data itself, with continuous refinement and revision of the coding framework.

In line with the SRHE 2025 theme of compassion, collegiality and communities in higher education: challenging the discourse, this paper reveals how research communities perceive and practice collegiality to create positive research cultures. By empowering our research communities to articulate their understanding of effective leadership practices and integrating their lived experiences into development and reward systems, the InFrame project will generate a wealth of evidence-based initiatives to democratise leadership and enhance research cultures. These initiatives have the potential to be readily adapted and implemented across various job families and career stages within higher education institutions throughout the UK, fostering a more supportive and rewarding research environment.

This paper explores preliminary findings from data submitted to the initial round of the Culture Catalyst Fund. The findings will guide the development of a new framework for inclusive collegial research leadership. By identifying key elements of leadership in creating positive research environments, the project will deepen our understanding of research cultures at the micro, meso and macro level, and minimise the risk of duplication in existing initiatives. The analysis will generate insights and evidence that will serve as the foundation for the collegial leadership framework, ultimately contributing to a more supportive and inclusive research environment for all.