

Making the Hidden Labour Visible: Mapping Leadership, Collegiality and Support Networks underpinning Research Culture Funding Success

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Research Domains

Academic practice, work, careers and cultures (AP)

Abstract

This paper explores how research leadership in the form of funding success is shaped through interpersonal relationships, informal support, and networks of care. Using the Culture Catalyst Fund (CCF)—a Wellcome-funded initiative within the 'InFrame' project—as a case study, we examine how structural opportunities interact with lived, relational experiences of participation. Building on Guccione's (2016) work on relational capital and invisible labour, we explore how trust, mentorship, compassion, and legitimacy shape decisions to apply for funding and underpin collegiality. Using Social Network Analysis, we analyse collaboration patterns across three CCF stages—Expression of Interest, Application, Post-Award—to identify who is named as Project Lead, how they emerge as Leader, and who helps them take shape. The study combines self-reported and operational data to surface infrastructures of collegiality and contributes a network-informed perspective on leadership, positioning care and connection as central to individual and collective success.

Full paper

Research culture is the environment, values, and relationships that shapes how research is done and who participates—yet efforts toward inclusion often remain disconnected from researchers' lived experiences (University of Glasgow, n.d.; Wellcome Trust, 2020). Alongside structural exclusionary factors, access to leadership of research funding is shaped by informal, frequently invisible networks of trust, compassion, mentorship, and encouragement (Schneider et al., 2024; Hunsicker, 2025). While compassion and collegiality are often spoken of in policy terms, they are rarely measured, recognised, or resourced in practice (Waddington, 2018).

In the context of this ongoing tension between structural ambition for a less biased approach, and lived experience, the Culture Catalyst Fund (CCF), housed within the Wellcome-funded InFrame project, offers a unique case study. InFrame—developed

collaboratively by the Universities of Edinburgh, Glasgow, and St Andrews—seeks to build an Inclusive Framework for Research Leadership that challenges traditional hierarchical role, by recognising and resourcing diverse forms of contribution to research culture change. CCF is one of InFrame's key strands: an initiative that widens access to funding for 'new and emerging leaders' across diverse roles and job families, fostering new ideas and perspectives. By supporting projects led by Research Professional Staff, Technicians, Research-only Staff, Postgraduate Researchers and others traditionally underrepresented in research leadership as well as Academics, CCF offers a practical test of how funding success can be fostered through combined structural opportunity and social support.

This ongoing study uses CCF as a lens to explore how leadership and collaboration are not only institutional constructs, but deeply relational phenomena. Building on Guccione's (2016) work on the role of relational capital and invisible labour in funding success, the study foregrounds the often-unseen forms of collegiality—peer encouragement, mentorship, emotional support—that underpin decisions to lead, apply for funding, and step into a position of institutional influence. It highlights that access to opportunity, and successfully taking it up is not solely a matter of policy or merit but is shaped by interpersonal relationships and the social networks of trust, compassion, encouragement, and legitimacy that surround individuals. In doing so, it also reflects the conference theme by interrogating how compassion and care manifest in research systems that have long privileged individual excellence over community scaffolding.

The study is shaped by two core research objectives:

First, we will analyse collaboration patterns across three stages of the CCF—Expression of Interest (EOI), Application, and Post-Award—using Social Network Analysis (SNA) to examine who occupies central roles (degree centrality) and who connects across functional areas (betweenness centrality). This examines operational data drawn from programme records across two CCF Rounds. Across both rounds, we received a total of 164 EOIs. Round 1 resulted in 53 full applications and 8 funded projects, while Round 2 yielded 63 full applications, with funding decisions currently underway. Using UCINET and NetDraw, we will map collaboration networks across institutions, job roles, and disciplines, identifying patterns of inclusion and clustering.

Second, we explore how individual applicants drew on informal support networks—through e.g. mentorship, institutional guidance, or peer encouragement—during their decision to apply, and throughout the application process. This uses self-reported data, where participants from all three CCF engagement groups (those who submitted only an EOI, those who applied but were not funded, and those who were funded) identify up to five individuals who influenced or supported their application journey. For each person, they specify the individual's role, type of support, frequency of contact, and perceived helpfulness. This data helps surface the invisible labour of collegiality that typically goes unrecognised in formal assessments of research leadership.

Through this combined approach, we assess not only what types of project leaders emerge but how they emerge—and who helps them take shape.

This study aligns with SRHE's theme of Academic Practice, Work, Careers, and Cultures. It challenges the notion of research excellence as solely an individual achievement by illustrating how support is distributed across informal, often invisible, social ties. It provides practical, evidence-informed insight into how universities and funders might recognise and resource the support systems that enable inclusive leadership.

By surfacing the structures of care, trust, and encouragement that underpin successful research participation, this project offers both a methodological and conceptual contribution. It highlights the need to reframe leadership not as a sole hero status, but as a shared social process—a way of being in relation with others (Elkins-Tanton, 2021; Bennett et al., 2023). In this, we offer a model for how local actions—small acts of encouragement, mentorship, and collaboration—can collectively generate systemic change.