

## Hidden labour and research culture: IRCC25 (Episode 77)

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[00:00:10] **Sarah McLusky:** But the point is, when you put those people together working on the same project. The differences are incredibly stark, and that is the issue, and that's why it feels like it's not fair.

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[00:00:41] **Sarah McLusky:** Hello there. I'm Sarah McLusky and this is Research Adjacent.

[00:00:48] **Sarah McLusky:** Each episode I talk to amazing research adjacent professionals about what they do and why it makes a difference. Keep listening to find out why we think the research adjacent space is where the real magic happens.

[00:01:03] **Sarah McLusky:** Hello and welcome to Research Adjacent. I'm your host, Sarah McLusky, and today's episode is something a little bit different. It's a report from the International Research Culture Conference, which was held at Warwick University on the 17th of September, 2025. Warwick hosts the event as the university is also home to the National Center for Research Culture.

[00:01:24] **Sarah McLusky:** But before we get onto my report from the event, I just thought I would do a quick aside on research culture for anyone who isn't familiar with the term and why I

see this podcast as fitting squarely into the research culture box. Like any workplace, universities and research organizations have their own ways of working that have evolved over time and for around a decade now.

[00:01:45] **Sarah McLusky:** There have been concerns raised that some of the ways, these ways of working are a bit toxic. The intense competition for funding, the publish or perish culture, that can lead to bullying and precarity and the celebration of star researchers, while colleagues who did the brunt of the work are often overlooked.

[00:02:01] **Sarah McLusky:** Universities are under huge pressure to demonstrate excellence and that can lead to dubious practices and burnout. If you want an overview of these challenges, then the Wellcome report, 'What researchers think about the culture they work in' provides a good summary, and I'll put a link to that in the show notes.

[00:02:16] **Sarah McLusky:** This podcast is very much rooted in that research culture conversation. When that Wellcome report came out, I was working for a Wellcome funded research institute and I didn't think it went far enough. I thought there was too much talk about researchers and not enough about the experiences of the other people who make up the research teams. In other words, the research adjacent people. Now I am a communicator, so I turned to the channel that I had available to try and raise the profile and voice the experiences of all the people impacted by research culture, not just the researchers.

[00:02:50] **Sarah McLusky:** So anyway, here we are. About five years ago, funders put some money into trying to investigate and change research culture, and this conference is just one of the things that has grown out of that investment.

[00:03:01] **Sarah McLusky:** This is the third year that Warwick has hosted the event, but it was my first time attending. I went because I successfully pitched a talk on professional development for research adjacent staff, and there'll be more about that later. And it also gave me an opportunity to catch up with some other folks who care about raising the profile of research adjacent staff.

[00:03:19] **Sarah McLusky:** Some of them who I have been LinkedIn friends with for a good while now. One of those was Rika Nair, who is the research culture manager at the University of Warwick, and I asked her to tell us a bit more about the conference and what they hope it will achieve.

[00:03:35] **Sarah McLusky:** We're here at the International Research Culture Conference, IRCC 2025. I wonder if you could tell us a bit about the event and what is happening here today.

[00:03:45] **Rika Nair:** So this event has really stemmed from the fact that a lot of the research culture challenges that we all face are actually common to different institutions, and they can't be solved by one institution because it is the whole system that needs to change.

[00:03:57] **Rika Nair:** So what we're trying to do here today is to bring all the different pieces of the puzzle together. And I think one big aspect of changing research culture and convincing senior leaders will be showing examples of where there already is good practice. In my mind, benchmarking is really important for making that argument and that evidence that things can be different.

[00:04:16] **Rika Nair:** So that's what I'm hoping is gonna come from this conference, as Kirsty has said in her keynote, that we will essentially have things that people can take away with them

to their own institutions that we can point the finger and say, this is working well there, why can't we do it here as well?

[00:04:29] **Sarah McLusky:** As you might expect, the day included a variety of talks, workshops, and plenaries. We started with a talk from Steven Hill of Research England, and a panel sharing perspectives on research culture around the globe. Speakers from South Africa, Ireland, and Australia confirmed that the challenges are similar elsewhere with big issues being precarity, impact, EDI and collaboration.

[00:04:50] **Sarah McLusky:** After coffee, we went into breakout sessions and that's where I had a slot speaking as part of a panel on professional development. As listeners to this podcast, I'm sure I don't need to tell you that research adjacent staff often inhabit a challenging space.

[00:05:04] **Sarah McLusky:** We often work alongside researchers on the same research projects, sometimes with more responsibility or influence than the researchers, but for those on professional services contract, the conditions of employment can be vastly different. Opportunities for professional development are patchy, recognition is siloed, and promotion usually isn't even an option.

[00:05:26] **Sarah McLusky:** Here's some extracts from my talk, which was called Snakes and Ladders, the reality of professional development for research enablers.

[00:05:34] **Sarah McLusky:** Most people on professional services contract, you can't get promoted. Generally it has to be the job that gets regraded. It can't be the person who gets promoted. Then there is also the fact that if you do want to move on, often it'll be you'll have to go to another organization, go to another department, wait for your manager to leave, and that's essentially often the options that are available.

[00:05:59] **Sarah McLusky:** And from my own personal experience, again and again, I would go to look for training. There would be training would come up around things like public engagement or science communication, and we were told, no, that's for researchers only. But what I think a lot of senior leaders in universities don't realize a lot of people doing those jobs have never been formally trained in those things. It's excluding people who could actually take that and bring it to their job.

[00:06:28] **Sarah McLusky:** Then we come to recognition, and this again a real example. From an organization I used to work in, I'm not gonna name names because it is common. They sent round an announcement that because of the success they'd had that year, they announced that several of the staff, several of the academics were promoted to professor, associate professor, whatever it was. The research manager who I know and I know how hard they work, got a 250 pound bonus, one off. And that, because that is all that was available. Now it's not, again, it's not that the managers there maybe didn't want to give them more acknowledgement, but that is all that was available within the institution to recognize how hard that person had worked.

[00:07:15] **Sarah McLusky:** And it comes against this back current of this narrative of bullshit admin jobs in academia. So again, undermining of the role that these people undermining the work they do as often invisible glue that holds things together. So all of this just reinforces the idea that these roles are second class citizens and that their contribution doesn't count, isn't valuable.

[00:07:42] **Sarah McLusky:** What is happening at the moment is a deeply unfair two tier system. Now, I'm not saying everything's perfect for academics 'cause it's clearly not. Also, a lot of the

challenges that are faced by professional staff are actually really common in every other workspace.

[00:07:57] **Sarah McLusky:** So these are not things that are unique to academia. But the point is, when you put those people together working on the same project. The differences are incredibly stark, and that is the issue, and that's why it feels like it's not fair. It's particularly important to think about this in the context that research enablers are considerably more likely to be female as well, so there's an equality and diversity dimension to this.

[00:08:27] **Sarah McLusky:** It was refreshing that I wasn't the only presenter or poster talking about research adjacent professionals. When I've been to conferences like this in the past, I have been taken aback at how even in a room of research professional staff, the conversation is often focused solely on researchers. One session that also centered the contributions of research adjacent professionals was led by Alys Kay . I missed it because it clashed with my talk, but I caught up with Alys afterwards.

[00:08:56] **Alys Kay:** System Shuffle started as an idea 'cause I had the privilege of interviewing 60 plus people all over the research ecosystem in all different roles for a project. And these were particularly diverse roles, lots of different levels of seniority, different types of institutions.

[00:09:12] **Alys Kay:** And one of the things that really struck me when I was reflecting on that was how many people feel powerless regardless of where they are in the hierarchy. Actually, people often feel quite isolated and I think all of us, whatever role we have often struggle to imagine what other people's roles are, to see the system, to think about the system as a whole thing.

[00:09:36] **Alys Kay:** And so I started to think, what if we could make a game that would actually make it safe to talk about some of these difficult things. To talk about roles, to talk about assumptions, to surface the hidden labor and hidden work that often go unrecognized. So particularly in roles like technicians, research managers research, software engineers, these are roles that actually keep the system going, keep research going, but actually a lot of their work is unrecognized.

[00:10:03] **Alys Kay:** So what System Shuffle actually does, everyone sits down at a table. They are randomly given a role. They then have to inhabit that role for the game. Often that's quite an uncomfortable moment, you turn over a role. And you might stumble and be a bit confused, but that's okay because the game is actually about discussion.

[00:10:22] **Alys Kay:** It's not about winning or losing, it's all about opening up spaces for curiosity and for fun and for safe discussion about difficult conversations.

[00:10:33] **Alys Kay:** I think a thing that often comes out, an observable thing that people often comment on is actually the recognition that often we hold hierarchies in our heads, essentially, and we permission our own behaviors in whatever role we are, based on stuff that we are maybe semi-conscious of or not totally conscious of. And actually what the game does is it objectify that and surfaces that.

[00:10:57] **Alys Kay:** There's something about powers that we all have a legacy of assumptions. And we all have rules that we abide by that are almost implicit and it actually makes it explicit and therefore we can think about what do we need to do to enable recognition of different people and diverse types of work.

[00:11:15] **Sarah McLusky:** It sounds fantastic. It seems like we need to get everybody out there playing the game.

[00:11:18] **Alys Kay:** So playing the game, which is created by the Research Culture Enablers Network something that's really important about the game is it's co-created by many different participants and voices. And we're committed to other people being able to take the game and develop it and remix it in any way that works for them in their environments as well.

[00:11:38] **Alys Kay:** So this autumn, the little group of people behind the game, my co-conspirators, we are putting together an online version that will be freely available to everyone. And we're also working on making it distributable so other people can use it or actually create sets themselves.

[00:11:53] **Sarah McLusky:** Alys also sent me these reflections afterwards. She said, 'one thing to emphasize is that System Shuffle doesn't end when the cards go down. There's always a lively discussion afterwards, and it isn't about who wins the game. It's about what surfaces. It generates critical thinking. People start naming hidden hierarchies, questioning assumptions, and reflecting on their own roles in a way that they rarely do in day-to-day work. Every group produces a different insight because their lived experiences are different, and that diversity of outcomes is what makes it powerful.' The System Shuffle Game was co-created by Alys and Rika, who you've already heard, as well as Ellen Cole from Northumbria University, Nicola Simcock from Newcastle, and Andrew Moss from Durham University, and as somebody based up in the Northeast, I'm delighted to hear that it is something that has included a team from this region.

[00:12:42] **Sarah McLusky:** As you heard, System Shuffle is a new project, but I look forward to seeing how it develops, and from what Alys said, I love the way it gently pushes people to see things from a different perspective and consider what might be possible because it's that individual perspective shift that actually changes things.

[00:13:00] **Sarah McLusky:** Another thing that is constantly evolving is exactly how we talk about the people who contribute to research but aren't researchers. As you well know by now, I call them research adjacent, but you might have also heard me talking about how I'm not actually particularly attached to the term. It was interesting to hear that Rika and the Research Enablers Network have been thinking about this too.

[00:13:22] **Rika Nair:** So the thinking behind the Research Culture Enablers Network is that it's quite a new role. research culture is quite a new topic, or was at least two years ago. But it continues to be an aspect that institutions are exploring, especially with the different messaging that we're getting around REF.

[00:13:38] **Rika Nair:** And so we've had these new teams and these new colleagues and I wanted to create a community for them to share, for us to share really share challenges. And also I've got the hypothesis that most people going into these roles have experienced research and have opinions on how things can be done better. And so by bringing them together, I'm hoping that we can develop solutions.

[00:13:57] **Rika Nair:** So we've got a LinkedIn group, so that's the Research Culture Knowledge Exchange Group. So it's probably a good place to start to see how the discussion has been going and to contribute your ideas.

[00:14:07] **Sarah McLusky:** So one thing that, I find really interesting and that relates to our podcast is the kind of language that we use to describe these sorts of roles. So I use research adjacent. You've said your community at the moment uses research enabler, but what are your thoughts on the language that we use?

[00:14:24] **Rika Nair:** So definitely one of the areas where I think it conflicts with parity of esteem is when we talk about these additional roles as being non-academic. Or even supporting researchers when a lot of these research enabling roles actually directly support the research itself. We're all here for the research.

[00:14:43] **Rika Nair:** And so there's been a lot of discussion actually gravitating towards whether the word enabler is the right one. I don't see it as enabling with any negative connotation, but enablers being the opposite to blockers. So for things to happen, you need these enablers, but I can see where people might think that term is not active enough.

[00:15:00] **Rika Nair:** And so I think a new umbrella term that we're hoping to share with the community is research professional, which we think would be an umbrella term for all the contributions beyond technical and academic that make research excellent.

[00:15:13] **Sarah McLusky:** If we settle on research professionals, I can live with that, although I'm not gonna change the podcast name anytime soon. Another joy of being at the event was telling people about the podcast, whether they had never heard of it or were already an avid listener, and it was a delight to meet people who had heard the podcast, including Anna Sharman and Dolly Coates. I asked Dolly what stuck with her about the day.

[00:15:38] **Dolly Coates:** I'm Dolly and I work as a ref impact associate for the University of Bristol's Faculty of Science and Engineering. And I guess a highlight of the day for me has been conversations around the research iceberg, which I think was what Sarah phrased it as.

[00:15:52] **Dolly Coates:** Really all the background work that goes on beneath the surface to make sure that research is really excellent and how we can more formally acknowledge that and promote it. Through continued professional development opportunities. So yeah, that's been really interesting to hear.

[00:16:08] **Sarah McLusky:** If you want to know what Dolly means by the research iceberg, I'll post a picture in the show notes. It's a way of visualizing the fact that what the outside world sees as research is actually a huge collective effort, including a wide range of people whose contributions are not normally recognized.

[00:16:24] **Sarah McLusky:** Basically, exactly what this podcast is all about. Maybe I should rename it as the research iceberg. Now let's stick with research adjacent. This is getting too complicated.

[00:16:36] **Sarah McLusky:** So the day ended with a keynote from Cat Davies, the outgoing Dean of Research Culture at the University of Leeds. Unfortunately, I had to leave before the end, but given everything I know about what is going on at Leeds, and that includes fabulous work, previous guests, Ged Hall and Nick Sheppard, as well as Ruth Winden, who has promised me that she will be a guest eventually and the rest of the team behind the Research Culture Uncovered Podcast. When it comes to tackling some of the challenges around the recognition and professional development for research professionals, Leeds are the ones to watch.

[00:17:07] **Sarah McLusky:** So I have no doubt that Cat has some really valuable insights, and I'm hoping that they will post a video of her talk online so I can catch up later. FYI Leeds are also settled on using the term research professionals, so it sounds like that might just be the one that sticks. We shall wait and see.

[00:17:26] **Sarah McLusky:** I wrote the first iteration of this podcast episode on a cramped train home from Birmingham to Newcastle, and one thing I was ruminating on was the challenge of turning research into action. In the conference it felt like we're still talking about problems without many solutions. Research culture could easily become another part of academic life where we spend endless amounts of time analyzing and researching the problem without actually doing anything about it. As Cat intimated at the start of her talk, research culture initiatives have boomed over the last few years due to UKRI and other funding.

[00:18:00] **Sarah McLusky:** But has anything actually changed? Interestingly, this was the exact question that I was asked by Dan King of Research Consulting Limited. After my talk, he asked, are things getting better? And I gave my honest answer, which was yes. I do think things are slowly getting better for people in research adjacent roles, and we definitely have to surface these issues before we can do anything about them.

[00:18:25] **Sarah McLusky:** I would love to think that this podcast and other initiatives like the Research Culture Enablers Network have helped to raise the profile of the incredible contributions that these professionals make and why they should be more highly valued. I do know that Leeds is working on a career framework tool for research professionals, and after we finished recording, Rika also told me about moves to create a framework like the Technician's Commitment, but for other research professionals.

[00:18:51] **Sarah McLusky:** All of that is good news, but another theme more apparent than the informal conversations I had over lunch and coffee was concerned that it's easy to talk and much harder to actually change things.

[00:19:02] **Sarah McLusky:** The uncertainty around the next REF and financial worries in the sector might push a return to the narrative of pressure, overwork and churning out research regardless of the human cost. As universities face at best belt-tightening and at worst redundancies or even closure, it would be easy to knuckle down and focus on the traditional research metrics, quietly shelving research cultural initiatives as things which are nice to have, but don't shift the bottom line.

[00:19:29] **Sarah McLusky:** But the truth is that workplace culture is the bottom line. People who are treated well do good work. Research excellence isn't at odds with research culture. Sustainable research excellence is a direct result of positive research culture. So let's not throw the baby out with bath water. This isn't an either or situation. The evidence is clear. In the long term. Positive research culture means happy staff, which leads to excellent research. But as so many of my previous guests have said, change in big organizations like universities can be frustratingly slow. Let's hope it doesn't actually grind to a halt.

[00:20:08] **Sarah McLusky:** And on that note, I will wrap up this report from the International Research Culture Conference. Thank you so much to all the contributors. If you want to get in touch with any of them or find a bit more about the initiatives that they've mentioned, you'll find links in the show notes. If you like the sound of the event, the organizers have announced that it will be running again in 2026 with an online day on the 21st of September and an in-person date on the 23rd of September.

[00:20:31] **Sarah McLusky:** And in terms of other events, I'm gonna be out and about soon at the Festival of Hidden REF in Birmingham on the 8th of October. And I'm hoping to produce another event report episode. So if you're gonna be there, please make sure you come and say hello.

[00:20:43] **Sarah McLusky:** And you could even record a little snippet like Dolly, Rika and Alys did. It still surprises me sometimes that anyone actually listens to this podcast, so I always love to meet you out in the real world, although I do have a terrible memory for names and faces, so I do apologize if I don't connect the dots straightaway.

[00:21:01] **Sarah McLusky:** With that, I will say goodbye for now and look forward to seeing you in the next episode. Bye.

[00:21:08] **Sarah McLusky:** Thanks for listening to Research Adjacent. If you're listening in a podcast app, please check your subscribed and then use the links in the episode description to find full show notes and to follow the podcast on LinkedIn or Instagram. You can also find all the links and other episodes at [www.researchadjacent.com](http://www.researchadjacent.com).

[00:21:26] **Sarah McLusky:** Research Adjacent is presented and produced by Sarah McLusky, and the theme music is by Lemon Music Studios on Pixabay. And you, yes you, get a big gold star for listening right to the end. See you next time.