

From Academic to Research-Adjacent with Matt Woodcock

(Research Adjacent Episode 91)

Matt views his pivot as a specialisation, rather than a side-step

<https://researchadjacent.com/matt-woodcock-episode-91/>



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[00:00:14] **Matt Woodcock:** Rather than seeing it as a discontinuity or heaven forbid as there being a kind of hierarchy between academia and professional services, is actually really seeing it ultimately as continuity or I suppose even specialisation.

[00:00:25] **Matt Woodcock:** We write with the expectation and hope that we will be peer reviewed and just having seen the, I suppose the generosity and the articulation of intellectual generosity at work every day is really fantastic part of that process.

[00:00:39] **Sarah McLusky:** Hello there. I'm Sarah McLusky and this is Research Adjacent.

[00:00:46] **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.

[00:01:01] **Sarah McLusky:** Hello there and welcome to Research Adjacent. We're back after a short Easter break with a brand new episode and a really interesting guest. Today I am talking to Matt Woodcock. Matt is currently research and impact support officer at the University of Leeds, but what makes Matt a particularly interesting guest is that before joining the team at Leeds, Matt was an academic, and I'm not just talking about any academic here, but a full professor of medieval and early modern literature.

[00:01:28] **Sarah McLusky:** Being an academic is a job that he did for nearly 20 years, and the really surprising thing is that he sees his move into a research adjacent role as a way of specializing in the work that he really loved, rather than the step down that many people might assume it to be. As you can imagine, we talk a lot about how he has navigated this change, including how it has shifted his identity and why he's now well placed to support researchers who find themselves where he used to be.

[00:01:53] **Sarah McLusky:** And we also talk about why he loves the peer review process. Yes, really listen on to hear Matt's story.

[00:02:01] **Sarah McLusky:** Welcome along to the podcast, Matt, it's fantastic to have you here.

[00:02:06] **Sarah McLusky:** I wonder if we could begin by hearing a little bit about who you are and what you do.

[00:02:11] **Matt Woodcock:** Thank you very much, Sarah. I am the Research and Impact Support Officer in the School of English at the University of Leeds. I've been at Leeds just over two years now I suppose two and a half years now, and my responsibility really covers three broad, but heavily interlinked areas linked to research, linked to impact, and I do a lot with research comms research communications. And so thinking about the visibility of our colleagues research, yeah, no two days are the same. I love that it's a mixture of kind of cyclical administrative activities and lots of project based tasks. So I enjoy the rhythm of those two.

[00:02:47] **Sarah McLusky:** Yeah. Yeah. Could you give us maybe a couple of examples of the sorts of projects that you've been working on recently or the sorts of research that's happening in your, the people, the academics you work with? Yeah,

[00:02:59] **Matt Woodcock:** Certainly. Well, in the school of English at the University of Leeds, we've got a wide range of different kinds of research taking place and lots of impact case studies going alongside those and in terms of projects, I've been really interested in thinking about resource development. I'm not gonna mention REF yet, but it will come up, I'm sure. But also been really interested in thinking about, I suppose the whole of the research lifecycle. Really interested in thinking about supporting researchers all the way through from that moment where you're thinking, oh, I could do this all the way through past publication, to thinking about, okay, what will this do in the world, who am I speaking to? How can I make my research better known? And I've been really interested in thinking about peer to peer development activity. And I set up a project probably about 18 months ago in the school, thinking about how to work with researchers really while research is on the anvil. So work in progress. All researchers have got work in progress, it's the one thing, which is the great leveler is that somebody is always working on something generally. And so it's really thinking about a peer-to-peer development structure, which enables colleagues to read each other's work, maybe to work in groups, maybe to work individually, and really to think how to preempt the responses that a peer reviewer panel or a funding panel or publishers panel may have. And to how to how to get past that part of the writing process, which certainly in the humanities can be quite isolating, quite lonely and quite

individualistic. And and again, I can speak a little bit about my own experience in, in that place as well. So that's something I've been really interested in.

[00:04:35] **Matt Woodcock:** We have a lot of colleagues working in across historical research, linguistic research and practice research as well. And so I'm I work with colleagues in all of those different sort of facets and sectors of that school.

[00:04:46] **Sarah McLusky:** Yeah. Fantastic. Thank you for that. And I think that, what you've said there about your interest in the whole of the research lifecycle and some of the challenges that researchers face in terms of getting their work pulled together makes a lot of sense. Once we know a bit more about your backstory, which is the main reason that I wanted to invite you on the podcast as a guest because we've had lots of people on before talking about impact and the ways that they support impact. But I think your perspective on it's really unique, could you tell us a bit more about your background and how you've ended up doing what you're doing.

[00:05:19] **Matt Woodcock:** Yes. I had close to about 20 years as an academic including 18 years in, in one role. I had a role as a, eventually I worked my way up to be a Professor in Medieval and Renaissance Literature at the University of East Anglia and had a career involved in teaching management and in, in research.

[00:05:40] **Matt Woodcock:** And so I've been involved in, in publishing projects, I published essay collections and monographs, and I've received funding. I've I had an impact case study in REF 2021 and I've had quite a lot of senior administrative roles in relation to research and impact as, as well. And so it's, it's been really interesting.

[00:05:58] **Matt Woodcock:** I look forward to talking, unpacking this a little bit as we go along in terms of thinking about that that experience and having been on what sometimes gets pitched as the other side.

[00:06:10] **Sarah McLusky:** Yeah.

[00:06:12] **Matt Woodcock:** And sort of having made that pivot to professional services

[00:06:15] **Sarah McLusky:** Yeah. Certainly is, to have your perspective. I think when we talked before we came on the call, you talked about it as almost having like a 360 degree view of the research process?

[00:06:26] **Matt Woodcock:** Yes. Yeah. I also worked for two years in STEM publishing when I left academia. And so that was a great pivot. In many ways thinking of what academia really looks like from, from a STEM point of view rather than a SHAPE point of view or humanities point of view.

[00:06:39] **Matt Woodcock:** I was heavily involved in the peer review process for academic journals and so working on that side of the process. I've worked quite a lot with publishers when I've been an academic in terms of being on boards and what have you. But it was just really insightful to think about what research looks like in, in different fields and actually really thinking about the the parts of the process of peer review which are vital, which is in some ways is the most exciting, collegial part of this profession. And how that then gets how that then gets managed.

[00:07:11] **Sarah McLusky:** I don't know that I've ever heard anybody describe peer review as the most exciting part of the research process before. So I love that you've got that, I love that you've got that insight there. So what is it that, that you find so compelling about that part?

[00:07:28] **Matt Woodcock:** It is, it is the idea of dialogue and it's something I, I think we'll probably come back to and talk about this. It is the ability to imagine two sides of a process, two sides of an argument, which is part of the writing process as a whole.

[00:07:42] **Matt Woodcock:** One one, one sees the process in involving, a writer, a reader, a reviewer, a publisher, and the publisher's got their own demands as well and an editor as well. And so seeing that the many different perspectives, views, demands involved in that process. And at the heart of that is this intangible force, which is individuals working frequently for free, reading to improve the work that's published and the sharing of new knowledge. And if we're thinking about sort of key core definitions of what research is, it's new knowledge and it's dissemination and peer review is fundamental to that. And we write with the expectation and hope that we will be peer reviewed and that our colleagues will have time to, to do that.

[00:08:29] **Matt Woodcock:** And just having seen the, I suppose the generosity and the articulation of intellectual generosity at work every day is a really fantastic part of that process. And then to see that, as an author, to see as an editor, and then to see it in as somebody involved in research support, it's it's, yeah, it's a very warming part of the what can be sometimes called a, a difficult terrain.

[00:08:52] **Sarah McLusky:** Yes. Yeah, no, really interesting to have that positive reframe of it. 'cause as you see, for a lot of people the idea of peer review is terrifying, it's so intimidating.

[00:09:04] **Matt Woodcock:** Absolutely. Yeah. And I've been on the end of some bruising, peer reviews myself. Yeah. I've thought, I thought, oh, okay. And so that's, part of my job as well is managing what happens when one gets not so good peer reviews.

[00:09:16] **Sarah McLusky:** Yep. Yeah, definitely happens. It's definitely part of it. So no doubt peer review, as you say, it's something you had a lot of experience of in your 20 years as an academic. I am sure there will be a lot of people listening thinking, okay, so 20 years as an academic all the way to being a professor, surely that's what people are aiming for. That's the goal. So why make a move?

[00:09:44] **Matt Woodcock:** I yeah, I made a pivot from academia, I suppose. In one sense it enabled me to, being academic is such a portmanteau role, such a portmanteau career involving teaching administration, management, publishing, grant applications. The word academic is covers such a multitude of different activities and I'd been in, in that profession for, for 20 years and making that pivot to professional services enabled me to focus on elements that I really enjoyed.

[00:10:14] **Matt Woodcock:** Maybe we don't talk about enough in relation to, to work or, or academic roles. But it did enable me to really, I think, focus on editing, which I, I love and really enjoy and indeed thinking about support as well. And I'm really happy to be in a job, which enables me to really focus on those particular aspects, drawing upon the hopefully the experience and expertise that I can bring from that, but sort of reframing it.

[00:10:39] **Sarah McLusky:** Yeah. So. How have you navigated then? One of the things that I talk to a lot of people who have maybe had, even if it's just a PhD or just, I don't mean to say just a PhD. A PhD in itself is a very challenging thing, but who've had some degree of a career in academia or they've thought about going down that path and then coming to do something different. That sense in the shift of identity and sense of self, how has that been for you?

[00:11:08] **Matt Woodcock:** Yeah, that was I suppose, one of the biggest challenges. As well, because I think, certainly as I inhabited the role of an academic I really saw it as a vocation it wasn't just something I did, it was who I was.

[00:11:22] **Matt Woodcock:** And had this real commitment to the job and the sort of, multiple shifting goals that that, that really has. And so it did take some time to actually really think is there, a way of detaching, well there has to be a real way of detaching who one is as an individual from what one does.

[00:11:39] **Matt Woodcock:** And that was that process of disaggregating has, has actually been really positive from a from a personal point of view in terms of dividing work and life. But also as I said, really focusing on the aspects of the academic career that I, I enjoyed and actually, rather than seeing it as a discontinuity or heaven forbid as there being a kind of hierarchy between academia and professional services, is actually really seeing it ultimately as continuity or I suppose even specialisation to use that a buzz word of the day.

[00:12:10] **Matt Woodcock:** But but it did really enable me to think that there are a lot of aspects of this that I'm effectively really just continuing and having a conversation about similar kind of things, similar kind of principles, same kind of worries, same kind of concerns, but but maybe viewing things from a different way.

[00:12:26] **Matt Woodcock:** And it is, as you mentioned at the top of the call, as a kind of 360 experience of this, which hopefully I can, I bring to the role and so it's, it is negotiating that idea of discontinuity and that's been really helpful from a sort of personal point of view.

[00:12:40] **Sarah McLusky:** Yeah, it's fascinating your description of it as in your head, it's almost like you've specialised, like you've niched down on this one specific part of things that, that, of the role of an academic that you enjoy doing. And I don't think I've ever heard anybody use that kind of framing before, and it's such a positive way to think about the way that these roles intersect and the ways that the skills overlap.

[00:13:10] **Sarah McLusky:** And so how have you now found being, and people often do talk about it as being different side of the fence, different sides of the academic process. How have you found it being now on the research professional side and interacting then with academics from that different perspective?

[00:13:33] **Matt Woodcock:** Hopefully I've found it, my colleagues have found it useful and insightful and, one doesn't wanna sit in in, in a position and say or been there, I've done that. Or let me tell you how it was when I was there. But it is. There's lots of parts of the process in terms of, building impact case study, in terms of receiving peer reviews, in terms of applying for funding, processes that I've been involved in from from writing funding i've been involved in assessing funding assessments quite a lot as well. Is just being able to see both sides of that process and actually say this is what's being looked for, this is, I know where you're coming from in terms of these set of priorities.

[00:14:11] **Matt Woodcock:** These are the priorities that a funder or that a reader of an impact case study will have. Let's think about how we can, maybe translate those or think about the the different demands. And, it's been a, it's been a learning process for me in terms of moving and looking at parts of processes which I think are frequently occluded or not even really considered because there's loads of things that I, universities are big very complex institutions and as an academic one is involved in one small part of that. But actually being involved in thinking about,

what it means to cost up a funding bid or to think about the the evaluation of an impact case study requires a whole set of new tools.

[00:14:47] **Matt Woodcock:** And it is that process of introducing academics to those parts of the process, those parts of their institution and indeed the profession, which is, it's, I think one of the things I really enjoy about the the role I'm in.

[00:14:58] **Sarah McLusky:** Yeah. And is there anything that you've learned in particular that helps to, as you say, in some, it sounds like, where you're positioned and your experience you're managing to, to blend those two worlds together, the professional and the academic. But certainly a lot of people do feel that there is a bit of a barrier there or there's a little bit of kind of antagonism between the different priorities of the roles. Is there anything you've particularly found that helps to break down those barriers?

[00:15:32] **Matt Woodcock:** I suppose the key thing is really empathy. It's actually really, when I'm involved in helping a colleague on the impact case study or funding bid or the assessment of their research, I, I know what it means. I know many how many hours and it takes to throw oneself into this or, to, and there's a lot of sacrifice involved and there's a huge amount of hidden unmentioned work and things that one chooses not to do that then goes into writing a book or putting a funding bid together or working with a team on a impact case study. And so I think it really just helps to be able to perceive the value of those activities and those sacrifices for want of a better term to actually think, okay, this is important, this counts.

[00:16:14] **Matt Woodcock:** And to really then think, okay let's think about how we can between the two of us get the best out of this. So it just putting myself in that other person's position because I've been in that position and I've known, there's lots of moments, peer review is part of that, where you don't get the results that you necessarily would like or the outcome that one would would expect having put in a lot of work. And so managing that is it's, is difficult, but it's, hopefully the experience of having managed that with others is something I can bring to the role.

[00:16:41] **Sarah McLusky:** Yeah, as you say, that empathy piece and, and when it is helping people to navigate, disappointment or critical feedback or things like that, there, there's this unseen emotional labour that goes along with that as well, isn't there, when you talk about all the kind of invisible contributions that go into things?

[00:17:02] **Matt Woodcock:** Yes, absolutely. And again, the, I suppose the sort of editing paradigm is something I do keep with me and the idea that the editing process looks at one thing and says, okay, it could be this. Actually, it could be this or with tweaks, it could be this. And having that idea of a sort of subtleness of thinking in terms of thinking okay, this article wasn't gonna end up in this particular publication, but it could be this, or it could now form the chapter of a monograph.

[00:17:28] **Matt Woodcock:** This funding bid wasn't successful, but it could now be this. And so it's the idea of reworking the the amazing intellectual resources one, one has and thinking, okay, we go again. We reshape it and it could be re-edited, reworked into into different forms.

[00:17:45] **Sarah McLusky:** Yeah. Yeah. It's interesting thinking about the way all of these different skills come together in different ways.

[00:17:50] **Sarah McLusky:** And so one thing that you have done since you've come into this research professional role is you've started to get involved with, some of the professionalisation

of it, I guess. You've been working with ARMA, haven't you? How did that come about? Yes. And what were you working on?

[00:18:07] **Matt Woodcock:** Yes, I, I'm a member of of ARMA and a member of the ARMA editorial working group. And so I'm involved in the editing, that word again, of ARMA Insights, the the magazine of the the organisation. And so involved in the part of a brilliant team involved in commissioning and thinking about what the readership of the magazine would be.

[00:18:28] **Matt Woodcock:** What the leadership needs or wants from that and been involved in commissioning as well as peer reviewing pieces for that. And actually being involved in ARMA has been just really insightful in terms of seeing the profession and not just the institution. And again, I've had a lot of experience of that from a, from an academic point of view.

[00:18:46] **Matt Woodcock:** Where you know be at universities and then go to conferences and be involved in professional organisations and being in a professional organisation connected with research support has just been an immense learning experience. Quite a learning curve. And I think I've gone into it as an academic would saying, okay I'm in a new role here.

[00:19:06] **Matt Woodcock:** What's the first thing I'm gonna do? I'm gonna read lots. It's been really good just in terms of putting me in direction of some amazing resources as well as just amazing people. Yeah. And actually it's the connecting with people and building new networks, which has been really exciting part of, of, of that process.

[00:19:23] **Sarah McLusky:** And a part as well of building that new identity, as you say from having that shift from a, an identity you had in an earlier part of your career.

[00:19:33] **Matt Woodcock:** Yes, absolutely. Yes. And connecting with a lot of people who are in a similar position in terms of thinking about what gets frequently called porous careers and people who are moving between academia or editing or working with a funder and professional services.

[00:19:47] **Matt Woodcock:** So it's just really good. Again, it's really good for just thinking, what, there is a a body of people involved in this rather than just that slightly individual isolated way in which I think sort of academia can work and sometimes post COVID, I think, I think individuals can work as well.

[00:20:04] **Matt Woodcock:** So it's been, yeah, I can't recommend it enough.

[00:20:06] **Sarah McLusky:** Yeah. And as you see, I think it's only when you really get into the research professional roles that you start to really understand how much of an iceberg research is, so you've got on the surface, there's the publications and the conferences and the contributions to knowledge, however that is, that is structured and presented, but then yeah, under the surface, all these different roles and different people and different contributions that they're making to keep the whole thing running. And certainly for myself, it was only when I came into a research professional role that I really got my head around just how much went into it.

[00:20:51] **Matt Woodcock:** Yes. The, I think back to when I was an academic, maybe a, an early career academic as well in terms of thinking, I just wanna write articles, just wanna write books, just want to spend time in archives and libraries. And, that's still a valued and vital part of the of the work.

[00:21:06] **Matt Woodcock:** But it is, like you say, it is an aspect. There's so many aspects and, it continues to grow and to gain in sophistication. And the culture of research has changed vastly from when I entered the profession as well. And that's been really interesting to see in the way in which, you know, collaborative and team-based research and interdisciplinary research and the use of kind of a level of sort of prioritisation of different types of research as well.

[00:21:29] **Matt Woodcock:** These are all sort of new nuances and it's, I'm seeing behind the scenes on that or rather seeing into territory, which as an academic I hadn't really fully ventured. You know, I'd worked with funders before. I worked for publishers before, but it was really looking at it into seeing just how vast this world of research was

[00:21:49] **Matt Woodcock:** it's been dizzying at times, it's part of the continued plan.

[00:21:54] **Sarah McLusky:** Yes. Yeah. Oh with your as you say, 360 degree view of the research process, i'm really interested in your answer to this question, which I like to ask all of my guests, which is, if you had a magic wand, what would you change about this world that you find yourself working in?

[00:22:12] **Matt Woodcock:** I love this question and I'm sure my answer is a real sort of cheat answer as well, but there's two answers. One is that, in some ways I'd love it if one could get more sort of detailed, nuanced feedback on unsuccessful funding applications where you just get a no and that's it. And obviously that requires somebody at the other end of that to spend time providing that information. So that's, the behind the magic there is somebody working. And so perhaps that's unrealistic. So I suppose if I was gonna have a second choice it would be really thinking, I suppose it'd be really useful for academics to have the opportunity to learn more and to be able to shadow research professionals and to have the I suppose a little bit more time maybe willingness to to do that. And so that doesn't necessarily require a magic wand that just maybe requires a little bit more time, which I know is what people ask for a lot.

[00:23:08] **Sarah McLusky:** Well, it is that's, that's one reason why it's a magic wand, 'cause we can magic up time. But but yeah, as you say, both of your answers there actually quite pragmatic and doable with the right resources and mindset really.

[00:23:24] **Matt Woodcock:** I'm not anti magic.

[00:23:28] **Sarah McLusky:** Yeah. But I think you're, I think you're right. I think that just more opportunities for people to really understand each other. I think it comes back to what you said about empathy, doesn't it? It's, academics and research professionals really understanding the pressures of each other's jobs.

[00:23:46] **Sarah McLusky:** And then also from what you've said there as well, it's almost like funders understanding what it's like to be on the receiving end of that no. And the fact that a little bit more nuance and constructive feedback can help to soften that blow, can't it?

[00:24:04] **Matt Woodcock:** Yeah. And I know as an academic, I would've found it really insightful, I think to have just spent an afternoon with the team costing funding bids or the that the team involved in impact administration. Just to find out, what happens once that application form has gone in and I was involved in quite a lot of peer review and various things like that. But it is, yeah. I think it's something which could be done.

[00:24:25] **Sarah McLusky:** Yes. Yeah.

[00:24:27] **Matt Woodcock:** With a little bit of money

[00:24:28] **Sarah McLusky:** Yeah. But also it, as I say, speaks to that thread of empathy running through the conversation that we've had and clearly just the way that you work.

[00:24:38] **Matt Woodcock:** Yeah. And having conversations and having dialogues and and chatting with people over coffee, which I do a lot.

[00:24:44] **Sarah McLusky:** Yeah. I think the more we connect with people, the better. That's what I'm all about anyway. Yeah. Thank you so much Matt for coming along and sharing your story. If people want to reach out to you at all, is there a good place that they can find you?

[00:24:58] **Sarah McLusky:** Do you hang out online or through the university website? What's the best?

[00:25:04] **Matt Woodcock:** The university website. I have a webpage there which describes what I do, who I am, talks a little bit about my academic route, and is a way to connect up with me.

[00:25:12] **Sarah McLusky:** Yeah. Fantastic.

[00:25:13] **Sarah McLusky:** We'll get that link and put it in the show notes. So thank you so much for coming along and sharing your story and the fact that you've seen it from all sides I think is really fascinating. So thank you.

[00:25:25] **Matt Woodcock:** Thank you, Sarah, thanks for this opportunity.

[00:25:28] **Sarah McLusky:** Thanks for listening to Research Adjacent. If you're listening in a podcast app, please check you're subscribed and then use the links in the episode description to find full show notes and to follow the podcast on LinkedIn. You can also find all the links and other episodes at www.researchadjacent.com.

[00:25:44] **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.