

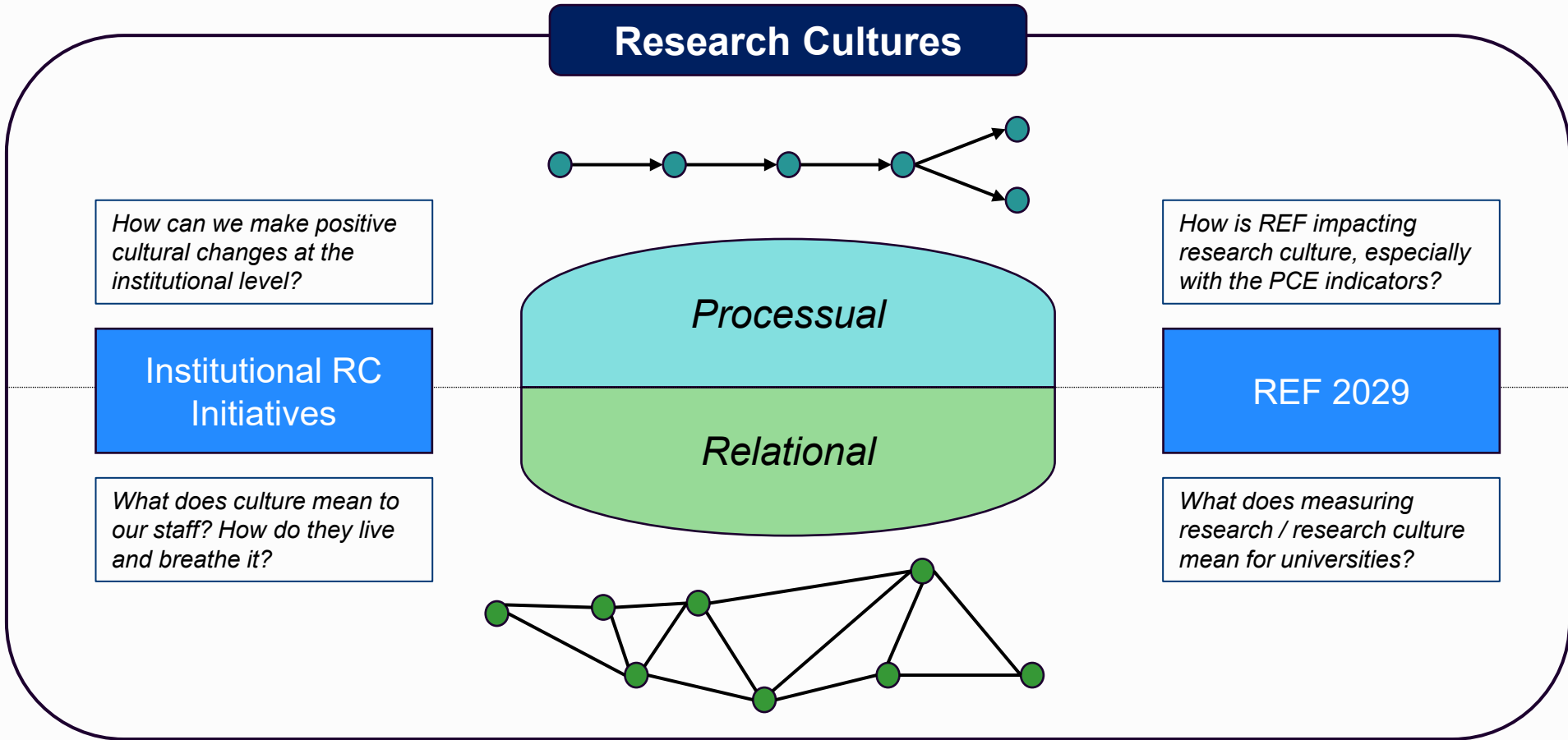
Cultural Traction: Embedding Research Culture Strategy in Research Communities

September 2025

Prof. Martin Holbraad, Dr. Aeron O'Connor, Dr. Dan Nightingale

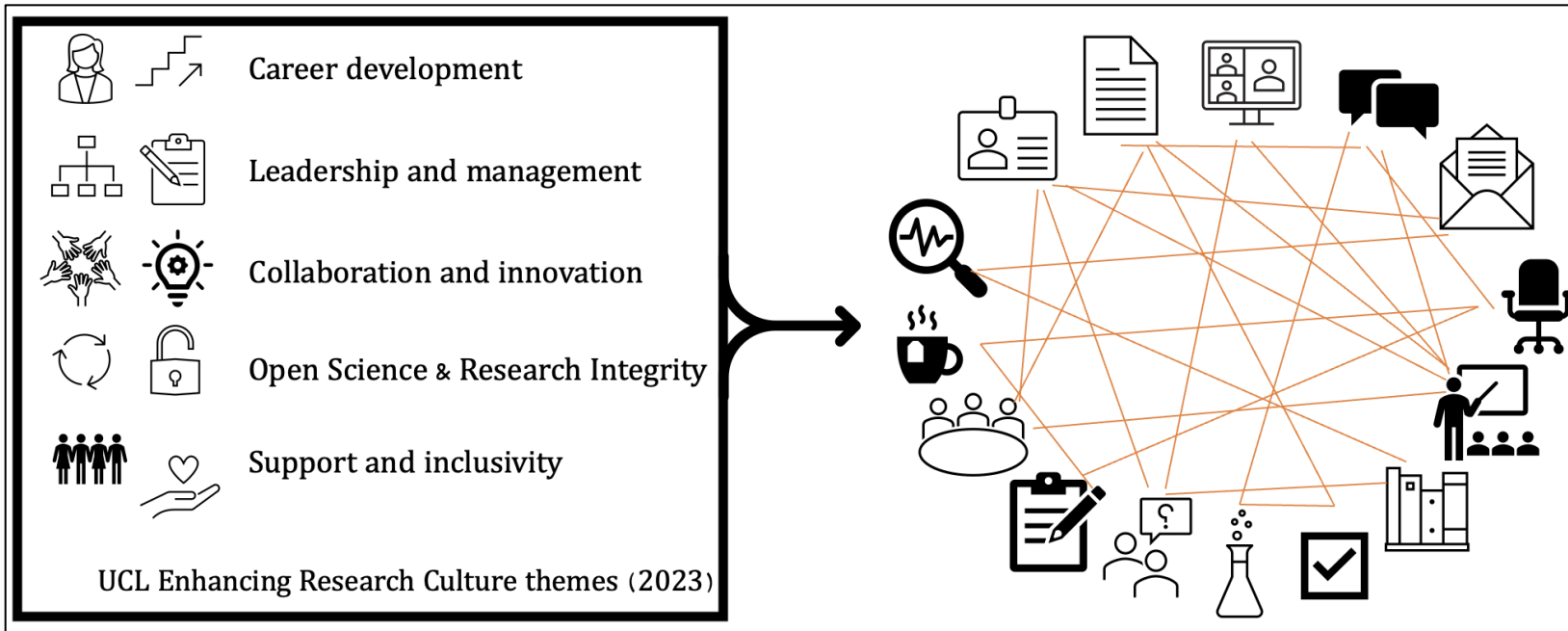
Research Cultures

What does it mean to engage Research Cultures anthropologically?



Pilot Project – Reframing the 'issue'

From *'processual'*-research culture to *'relational'*-research culture



RC is fundamentally relational. It is not driven by processes or policy, nor is it simply structured by linear career trajectories and tasks.

'Relational' not only refers to relationships between people, but also to relationships researchers have to institutions, spaces, constraints, pressures, opportunities, and so on.

Currently, **relational-RC** and **processual-RC** are treated as separate spheres. But relationships impinge on processes, just as processes impinge on relationships.

Processual-RC is sometimes even treated as a 'solution' to the messiness of **relational-RC**, a way to 'manage' RC and make it more transparent, efficient or accountable.

Cultural Traction Project

What are we doing? What have we found so far?

- **Four ethnographic case-studies** at participating universities, each ~two months long. Focusing on research culture initiatives, REF / PCE Preparation, academic leadership and researchers in single schools / faculties.
- **Sectoral interest is generally welcome**, as many academics recognize problems in the culture of their organisations and are eager to contribute to fixing them.
- However, **Research Culture remains hard to define**. As such, it presents challenges implementing structures to improve, manage and robustly report on Research Culture.
- **Hope is present but fragile**. Research Culture programmes will struggle if they become perceived as another performative ‘tick-box’ exercise. Alongside this, time and resource constraints are a constant barrier to engagement.
- Initiatives are successful when they **aren’t over-prescriptive** and allow university staff to lead, provided by structures and guidance to let staff flourish. However, time and resources remain a key constraint.
- **Large institutions have the money to invest** in dedicated staff and programmes, risking exacerbating sectoral inequalities. This is particularly sensitive and complex in the middle of wider challenges that universities face.

Research Cultures Forum

Where are we going?

- **Ongoing workshops to** discuss and share best practice on a comparative basis, linking into wider sectoral conversations and initiatives.
- **Furthering holistic, social-scientific study** of research culture – using academic expertise to help drive sustainable improvement.
- **Encourage person-centric ideas of culture** grounded in institution-specific relationships, supported through robust processes and governance rather than dictated by them.
- **Interested in joining in?** E-mail dan.artus@ucl.ac.uk!