

WHY

Research Culture Context

Research Assistants and Associates (RAs) are central to most funded projects across UK universities, but their perspectives are often overlooked by institutional leaders and policymakers.



The process of creating metrics matters

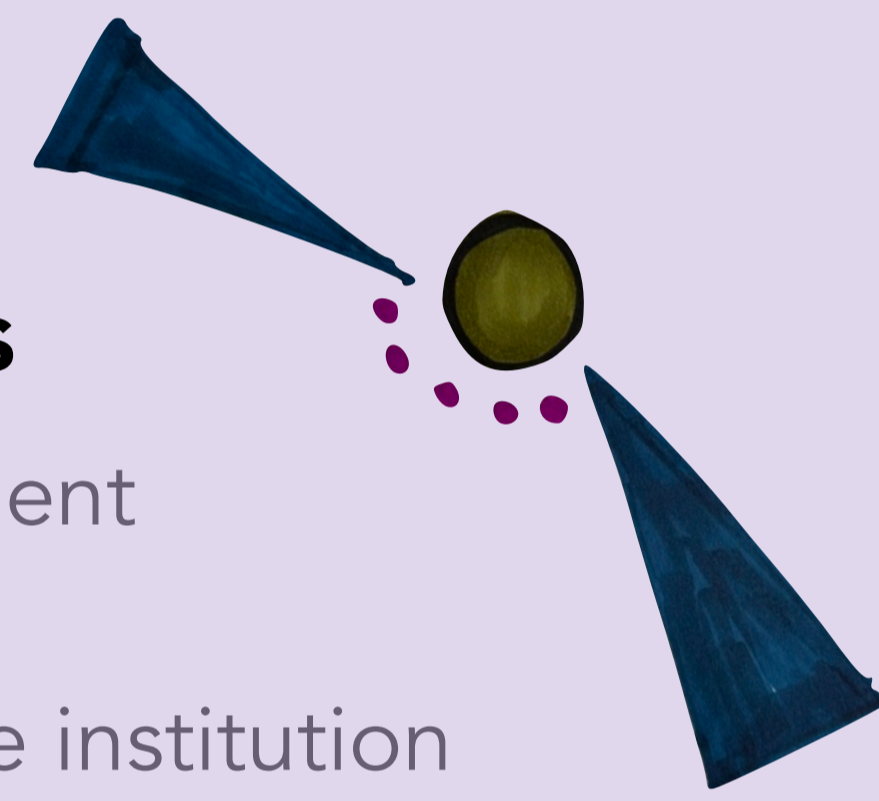
Metrics reflect the processes that produce them. We asked: What metrics matter, to whom, in what context, and how? Our aim was to articulate alternative Research Culture metrics that evaluate how equitably and supportively units and university structures operate from the standpoint of RAs.

"If it is not being measured numerically or digitally, then invisible. If invisible — then it is not being taken into account or prioritised."

WHAT

What we heard: recurring themes

- Structured, resourced career development
- Mentorship and everyday support
- Stability and stronger connection to the institution
- Physical space and decent working conditions



- "How many RAs end up as permanent staff?"*
- "Are RAs given their own research funds?"*
- "Are RAs able to do their own projects?"*
- "Get rid of RAs – ! Academic staff should not have this separation and hierarchy."*
- "Build in promotion when bidding for new grants"*

SO WHAT?

What Next?

To embed RA perspectives in ongoing Research Culture work, we propose to:

- Make RA Voices an annual, Research-Culture-sponsored event to maintain a "live" metric and track change over time.
- Use this as a model for creating more non-hierarchical spaces for experiential, social learning and candid, critical dialogue across grades
- Institutionalize and report these metrics at unit level, with RA involvement in interpreting results, co-designing actions, and venues for response.



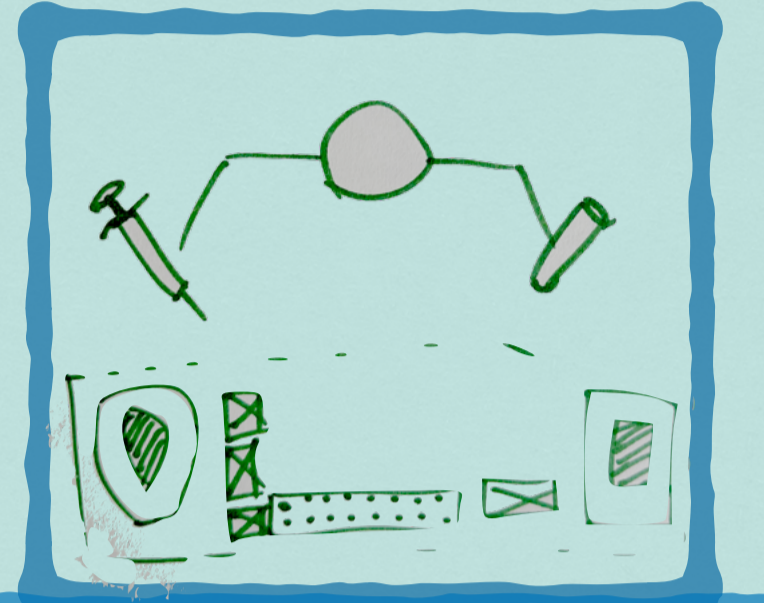
HOW

RA Voices Workshop - An Embedded, Participatory Method

We designed the event as an experimental, embedded evaluation that centres RAs' situated perspectives to inform more inclusive and meaningful metrics. On 30 July at Newcastle University, eighteen RAs met for RA Voices—a forum to reflect on their experiences, explore what could be improved, and imagine more empowering and inclusive research environments. The quotes and images shown here come from their contributions.

Activities: reflexive design (after Hibbert, 2021)

- **Embodied** — Drawing/introductions: "Imagine yourself at work—draw a top-down view of yourself in your research context."
- **Emotional** — Stories from the Future: "Write a vision of the future, in which conditions, cultures, and structures have changed. What does the RA role look like?"
- **Cognitive** — Co-creating metrics: "How might we measure those changes— and use them to focus attention on what needs to change now?"
- **Relational** — Group dialogue: Small-group and full-group discussions to refine futures and translate them into potential metrics



"Storytelling from the Future" The University in 2040

"I would hope to see the end of the temporary contracts and maybe something more akin to the way project managers are hired. Essentially once a project ends you are still employed and are moved onto another project."



"More focus on RAs' future development rather than viewing them as a disposable resource. PI is responsible to help career progression. Research needs to be translated! (Not just shelved!)"

"Allow RAs to apply for their own funding (not write grants for their PIs). This will help bring in money to support longer positions / permanent staff. The grant / collaborative money brought in by RAs should be reflected in their salaries & promotion opportunities."

"Because RAs aren't getting kicked out so regularly and there's less turnover, it would be easier for there to be continuity in the culture of the department and RAs wouldn't get forgotten."

"Folks around me seem jaded by my continued railing against the system – and maintain that fixed-term RA contracts are still a kind of passage, but I am now closer to retirement than to the beginning of my career, their logic fails to stack up. And all the while the "prestigious" research intensive university makes its name and reputation off the back of my stunted career and sleepless nights of financial worry."

"The team puts together grant requests which are larger covering a bigger overarching idea so the grant may cover 10 yr time period but within that you can work on smaller projects that build so you don't need a full project planned but you can work on something and wait for the results before deciding what to do next."