The Moral Dimension to Developing Research Culture: Advocating for caught, taught and sought approaches

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Abstract

The paper seeks to justify a moral dimension to research culture, both in terms of the moral commitment to pursuing a shared sense of purpose by researchers, and a moral obligation to provide a positive environment for researchers to flourish in by the employer. The paper draws on synergies and comparisons with work on character education, in schools and professions, and which has found prominence in education policy and practice since 2012. Where work on character education in higher Education Institutions (HEIs) is in its infancy in the UK, there are both examples from overseas (USA, Singapore) and transferable elements from work in schools that can help to demonstrate that focussing on moral development is beneficial to all. This paper views the cultivation of research culture not as a 'fix' for negative experiences that researchers encounter, nor as a means to correct perceptions that see culture as inherently bad. By viewing research culture through a moral lens, it is possible to approach its development and cultivation in holistic and encompassing ways which seek to allow researchers to become the best versions of themselves.

In establishing what the moral dimension to research culture is, I suggest that we can learn from work on character education to further explore frameworks for embedding provision within HEIs for morally focussed research culture initiatives. The paper draws insights from successes in how character education has been embedded in schools and professional education, with a particular focus on a framework for character and constitutive of four categories of virtue, embracing individual moral development with collective, communal citizenship. Further, I present three approaches for a framework for how it can be developed; where culture is 'caught' through a positive and collegial ethos, 'taught' through a combination of discrete teaching and learning activities, which, in combination, can encourage researchers and those supporting research to

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'seek' out their own opportunities to develop research culture more actively.

The paper concludes with two main recommendations to view culture as more than a 'nice to have', but as means to facilitate positive, impactful research; and to actively cultivate culture through caught and taught approaches that will lead to researchers seeking opportunities to do so themselves.

Introduction: What is the Moral Dimension to Research Culture?

Research Culture is a term that is growing in prominence, interest and criticism. Its explicit inclusion in the Research Excellence Framework (REF) 2029 under 'People, Culture and Environment' (PCE) has provoked Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) to place more emphasis on developing research culture and capturing data that shows said development (see **Research England, 2023**). Recently, REF published an update saying that it was 'committed to the development of a robust set of indicators and a robust process for assessment of PCE within REF' and has launched a pilot exercise to test appropriate metrics and indicators (**Research England, 2024**). There is a way to go, but this is a start in overcoming scepticism in seeing culture as a 'catch all' for undefined areas of research support and provision.

This recent update still does not offer clarity over what research culture is, how it is to be defined within a REF context, nor how it should be measured. Many UK universities have created dedicated webpages to research culture where they offer some form of definition (albeit, in the most part, somewhat vague and underdeveloped definitions). However, there is a shared agreement and collective will to commit to developing something that positively embraces challenges facing research and researchers in higher education, that seeks to create pathways for career progression, personal development, and eradicate negative behaviours such as bullying, harassment and of making unreasonable expectations of others.

Universities are beginning to state the priority challenges that a positive research culture should seek to address. The Research Culture Enablers Network, run out of the University of Warwick, found that research leadership was the number one area to prioritise, followed by psychological safety and creating responsible research culture metrics.

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The reason for including these is to show the diversity of both opinion and challenge for those working in the research culture space.

Where there agreement on what culture covers is around viewing research culture as encompassing an amalgam of cross-disciplinary, cross-career stage, and cross-institutional activities that constitute the ethos and community of working. Early Career Researcher (ECR) development, recruitment and selection procedures, equality, diversity and inclusion (EDI) practices, career pathways, collegial working environments contribute to the setting of a research culture. These, individually, will receive mention in HEIs organisational strategies, yet are varied and disparate.

Critics may deem such topics too disparate to consider under one umbrella term to be able to address them with any meaningful significance. This is the challenge that HEIs face where they prioritise research culture in internal and external communications and attempt to demonstrate positive practices that are authentic in nature, and not simply motivated by scoring well in future REF metrics. However, I say that by viewing culture through a moral lens can assist with a coherence and consistency of approach in finding ways to address and cultivate culture. This is already present in much of the spiel that HEIs are writing on culture, whether meant intentionally or not. This moral obligation is also something that runs through academic work on what constitutes research (see for example **Callahan, 2003: 57-84; Wolfe, 1989**).

The link to matters of moral obligation and ethics can already be seen in the statements on culture that universities are publishing and the links they are drawing in what constitutes culture. For example, the University of Birmingham culture webpages offer links to a sub-page on 'inclusive and respectful environments', as part of a focus on equality, diversity and inclusion (EDI), combatting harassment and shared institutional values. In addition, pages on more generalised 'responsible research', 'integrity and ethics', 'supporting your career' and researcher training and development' show how culture can be seen as an umbrella for institutional commitments to enhancing workplace experiences of staff.

Ultimately, this moral obligation from HEIs and its leaders is rooted in helping researchers be the best versions of themselves. It is rooted in an understanding of the purpose of research, what it is for and what it attempts to achieve. Further, it involves an acceptance that research can be intrusive, involves human interactions, and has real world impact. Therefore, as a collective, there is an obligation for HEIs to ensure that the research it puts its name to is undertaken in an ethically sound manner, which also ensures that researchers are supported to be morally

upstanding in the way they interact with participants, analyse data and report findings.

HEIs already have ethics committees that are tasked with ensuring that research is undertaken in an ethically sound manner, however a moral view of research culture goes broader. Where ethics committees do not tread is with regards how researchers interact with one another, how they are supported by and support colleagues, how they make contributions to the wider good of the HEI, rather than remain narrowly confined within their disciplinary silo. In the same way that we accept teachers have a moral obligation to ensure pupils are educated in a morally salient manner, so HEIs should carry a similar obligation with regards its research community.

In foregrounding the moral dimension to research culture, I attribute some degree of moral responsibility for those leading culture initiatives in HEIs. This is in the same way that there is a moral obligation for teachers in schools to take responsibility for the moral development of students and pupils that are in their care. This is an aspect of teaching that many teachers value and prioritise as they begin their teacher training, but is not something that is always maintained in practice (**see Arthur et al., 2015**).

However, establishing a framework by which morally focussed culture initiatives can take root, akin to successful attempts in character education, I propose that it is possible to cultivate a morally imbued research culture, The approach that I propose focuses on 'caught', 'taught' and 'sought' approaches which marry organic and prescriptive ideas which are intended to create a sense of purpose in the individual to seek out their own opportunities to carry on their moral development (**Jubilee Centre, 2022a**).

Having introduced why learning from character education circles is relevant and informative, I will go on to introduce each of the three approaches and offer definitions and examples of how they can be applied to research culture.

The paper concludes with two recommendations. First, that for research culture to be meaningful and effective, it must be seen as more than a 'nice to have' in HEI strategy and vision, forming something which is part of meaningful strategy and authentic decision making, as a means to facilitate positive, impactful research. Secondly, to actively cultivate positive research culture in HEIs and with all stakeholders and partners involved, that doing so through an holistic approach that embraces caught and taught approaches, will lead to researchers seeking opportunities to do so themselves, where they see the benefit not only to themselves and

their own research, but what being part of a rich and diverse culture can achieve..

Research Culture as Positive

Where we speak of research culture, the notion of it being 'positive', rather than 'negative' is often implied, rather than explicitly stated. As the term receives more attention, and conceptions and definitions are unpacked, so HEIs will need to become more explicit in addressing what they are doing to cultivate culture amongst research staff, and become proactive, rather than reactive, in developing one. At present, research culture is being used as a term charged with combatting negative practices, such as bullying, uncertainty about contracts, workload pressures, the challenges of the funding landscape for research, and the general pressures of working in HE research. It is essential that we do not see embracing research culture as a way to 'fix' these negative aspects. Seeing it as such would be short-sighted, short-termist and narrow any conception of research culture. Focussing only on correcting the negatives will not allow for growth, cultivation of new ideas, acknowledgement of positive experiences, from the enablers within the research culture community. Instead, HEIs should think longer-term, embracing the moral and requirements of leading and delivering world-class research and cultivating a research culture that is permissive and enabling for all involved.

This conception allows us to address the moral dimension to developing culture from a community perspective. Indeed, we can use more morally-significant language when considering both what that development entails and the anticipated outcomes of developing such a culture. This is language familiar to HEIs, whether they explicitly embrace any moral dimension or not, where universities reference values statements and expected behaviours. The outcome of the positive development of research culture is described by some HEIs in terms of enabling researchers and related personnel to 'thrive' and 'flourish' . The notions of 'thriving' and 'flourishing' are somewhat synonymous; of growing vigorously, but of becoming the best version of yourself – going beyond growth in a professional sense but demanding 'engagement with self-transcendent ideals and ignite awe-filled enchantment' (**Kristjánsson, 2019: 1**). Such a conception of flourishing as an ultimate aim of good education provides a common purpose for those involved in research to unite around.

Some may ask why we need to consider any notion of a moral dimension to research culture – we come to work, do our jobs, get paid and go home. This is another short-sighted, restricted view of professional life. If we only operated in terms of the functional tasks that we are required to do, with

a 'clock in and clock out' mentality, any notion of a community dimension of culture becomes stunted. If we look at 'culture' in the broad sense of the ideas and behaviours of a particular group of people, we can embrace its social dimension and seek the benefits of actively participating in a community, both personally and culturally.

This paper adopts an approach that contributing to research culture is something that each of us linked to research can feel an imperative to contribute to. Regardless of what our roles are, from external partners outside of academia, to administrative support staff, to researchers working under the direction of PIs and co-Is, to funders, research councils, academic leads, research managers and HEI Executive Boards, we all have a role to play in cultivating the culture in which we want to work and in which we want to develop future researchers. As part of that, acknowledging that there is a moral dimension to culture is essential to ensure that experiences are positive, HEIs are seen as pleasant, supportive, and rewarding places to work. This is, in short, because supporting, applying for and undertaking impactful research should be relationship-based, requiring effective modes of communication across sectors and departments, reliant on adequate inter-personal interactions for effective teamworking, rooted in collegial spirit. Within any inter-personal communication dimension to work, there is an affective nature, involving the expression of various virtues and emotions, which require some level of acknowledgment, regulation and development, at an individual and at an organisational level.

In short, research aims to contribute to the public good. This contribution is not always made explicit, either by researchers or HEIs, but is important to acknowledge in research culture terms. In terms of 'research', embracing a morally positive research culture can move researchers out of silos, encourage interdisciplinarity, and positively impact institutions in a myriad of ways. I accept that, for many, embracing concepts of moral and ethical challenge can be difficult. However, this is where recent research and application of character education in schools and professions can be of use, both in terms of conceptualising the moral imperative to 'do' research in an ethical way and cultivating approaches to providing those in the research community with an ethically sound moral framework. I contend that embracing what has worked in character education can be applied to HEO research culture, only if we acknowledge that research has an ethical aspect, and that HEIs hold a responsibility that extends beyond the instrumental enabling of research to take place.

Learning from character education

I attest that there is a moral dimension to the cultivation of research culture at HEIs that employ scholars responsible for the education and training of the researchers of the future. That moral dimension encompasses a responsibility of researchers to conduct ethically sound research, for HEIs to ensure that research undertaken in its name is ethical, and provide an environment for research-related staff to thrive. Investigating the moral dimension of education raises big questions that researchers and philosophers have grappled with for centuries. There has been a rise in interest in 'character education' in the UK from 2010 onwards. In 2016, character education became a formal aspect of English Education Policy, under the, then, Education Minister Baroness Nicky Morgan. In 2019, it was formalised in the Ofsted Inspection Handbook for schools and other education providers (including departments of teacher education) (**OfSTED, 2019**).

There has been extensive research undertaken in the UK since then that has sought to consider 'character education' from a range of perspectives, theoretically and empirically. Much of this work has been led by the Jubilee Centre for Character and Virtues , at the University of Birmingham, where researchers have collected data from tens of thousands of participants, worked with thousands of teachers and teacher educators at hundreds of schools, HEIs, professions, as well as broadening outreach and impact across a number of countries, internationally. The work of the Jubilee Centre is rooted in neo-Aristotelian virtue ethics, seeing character as 'a set of personal traits or dispositions that produce specific moral emotions, inform motivation, and guide conduct. Character education includes all explicit and implicit educational activities that help young people to develop positive personal strengths called virtues.' (**Jubilee Centre, 2022a: 7**).

Neo-Aristotelian moral theory underpins many (most) modern day approaches to character development. Here, I use 'character development' and 'moral development' somewhat interchangeably, intentionally to show how agreed definitions and concepts do not necessarily have to have an agreed language, but that a shared set of guiding principles can often bear fruit. For example, for those who may take issue with the term 'character' – which could be scholars and professional support colleagues who do not hold any philosophical grounding in moral theory, or those who subscribe to a non-virtue ethical approach). Whilst explaining the pros (and cons) of neo-Aristotelian virtue ethics is somewhat outside the scope of this article, I refer to work by Kristján Kristjánsson, David Carr and others on kinds of moral theory and nuances within virtue ethics (**see for example Carr, Arthur and**

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Kristjánsson, 2017) and its application to teaching (**Cooke, 2017; Arthur et al., 2016**), higher education (**Jubilee Centre, 2021**) and professional ethics (**Arthur et al., 2023; Carr, 2018**).

The Jubilee Centre Framework for Character Education in Schools (2022a) is a document that seeks to provide an overview of the theory of moral education, in accessible language for practitioners and school leaders, whilst embracing the moral obligation that education at all levels involves, and offering a coherent approach to delivering meaningful and authentic provision and activity. I argue that its identification of 'caught', 'taught' and 'sought' approaches to moral education can be applied in a research culture context.

The need for character-led provision

Formalised provision for character and moral education is intended to build on what already takes place in the setting, be it a school, university or other organisation. It is presented as a lens through which we can view moral development and professional development and, in HEIs, the ways in which research, teaching and learning are modelled, delivered and engaged. In exploring the moral dimensions of research culture, we can provide a framework for research culture to become an embedded part of research. Consideration of the type of research that 'we' (institutionally, collegially and individually) want to undertake, how we wish to go about doing it, and its impact on colleagues and external partners are often at the heart of research strategies and visions that HEIs outline in their external communications, but much less unpacked in terms of understandings and conceptions that underpin the visions.

The character and integrity of researchers and research-intensive institutions should be regarded as more fundamental than personality or personal style as a researcher or senior leader, and be regarded as no less important than mastery of research methodology, subject content, and techniques for delivering impactful research.

Often, research strategy language that HEIs use is amoral, instrumental, and skills-orientated, or couched in adherence to university policies. Where the notion of developing a positive research culture has arisen in recent months, so the inclusion of language that can take discussions in a moral direction has begun to come to the fore, with the idea that a positive culture can help us 'thrive' and 'flourish', as already mentioned. Further, though, there is a growing reference to specific virtues in institutional environment and culture statements, such as engaging in critical thinking, undertaking research in a compassionate and responsible manner, and upholding values of integrity, honesty, and the like, all of which demand high moral standards in order to uphold (e.g., Flourish@Durham).

Perhaps because conceptions of character and virtue are complex, sometimes contested, and often seen as demanding or unattainable, so organisations and institutions may shy away from placing any central focus on them. However, character education research has shown that a focus on moral development and virtues is something desired by parents, pupils and teachers – in the context of schools, can help develop moral decision making – in educational contexts and in professional practice, and provide a sense of moral purpose in the work that people do. For research in each of these areas, see, for example, Harrison, Dineen and Moller (**2018**); Arthur and Earl (**2020**); Arthur et al (**2021**).

Caught, taught and sought approaches

In terms of delivering activities and provision that embraces the moral dimension to education and research, I propose that these can fall into three categories, each working in synergy with the others, but seen very much with the first two provision a foundation for the development of the third.

Firstly, caught approaches to moral development can foreground ethical leadership, culture and ethos. Second, taught approaches include direct teaching of rationale, language and tools. Third, members of the research culture community will seek opportunities freely for moral development, on their own, and as part of a collective. Many of the approaches and activities that are mentioned below are drawn from those that have been evidenced as contributing to character education provision in schools, but then adapted for higher education. See the Character Teaching Inventory as an empirically informed document that details over 70 practices (**Jubilee Centre, 2022b; Arthur, Fullard and O'Leary, 2022**).

With regards caught approaches, I propose that HEIs intent on embracing the moral dimension of research culture can harness existing environments and communities, and apply a moral lens to developing the culture and ethos of an organisation. With regards environment, I give examples of how and where this can include a moral dimension. This could include the physical space in which people work, maximising the conditions for collegial and collaborative working; considering how to foreground and how to celebrate positive spaces for moral, spiritual, social and cultural interactions. Focussing on vision and ethos of an institution through cultivation of a morally positive community, with clear and regular communication at all levels, visibility of senior figures, and a clear ethos and strategy for moral development, amongst other institutional priorities. Relationships are key to caught provision, with interactions at all levels, between students, staff, researchers and senior leaders, as well as incorporating the wider community and stakeholders, involving the development of virtues such as empathy, compassion, citizenship and

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service. Universities are not islands, but part of regional, national and international communities, as beacons of educational and research excellence.

Caught activities are often best achieved where championed by senior leaders. An example to spotlight is the University of Birmingham School, which opened in 2015, and is explicitly dedicated to character development of students, and of staff in all posts. Schools offer relevant and engaged models for HEIs to learn from, not just in terms of education, teaching and learning, but also from a moral dimension. For example, their practices with regards recruitment and selection prioritise character education, in the way in which posts are advertised, candidates are selected, and feedback is given. It is also an obligation of all candidates invited to interview to discuss what character education means to them and how they will embed it in their everyday practice. In living this aspect of caught provision, so integrating more prescriptive and specific taught practices can enable staff to become more engaged with the moral development of colleagues and students.

With regards taught approaches, these are obviously better placed to be embedded into teaching and learning provision rather than research, through curriculum activities, use of stories and biographies of exemplars, use of moral dilemmas, debates, extra-curricular activities, etc. However, can easily be adopted and supported by researchers and those involved supporting research through peer-review processes, research development strategies, peer-mentoring, development and identification of career pathways, and inclusion in training materials. There are obvious links with tools such as the Vitae Research Development Framework (**Vitae, 2011**) in terms of the expected attributes and behaviours for researchers to do research, so taught approaches to moral development could be woven into existing researcher development frameworks.

It is important to stress that where introducing and extending moral development provision, it is often most successful when it has been viewed not as an additional item to add to one's workload plate, but a way of reconceiving how one view's their plate of work-related tasks and responsibilities. This has been proven in character education work in schooling (**Fullard and Edwards, 2020**). In viewing one's work through a lens of character, both in terms of one's own and that of those stakeholders one engages with, so one can be encouraged to act more empathetically, lead with ethical responsibility and undertake research in the most morally accountable way possible.

In doing so, one will actively pursue one's own opportunities to 'give back' in a morally salient manner. Often, institutions will find instances of this happening in practice already, and in championing moral approach to

research, so opportunities for senior leaders to celebrate the character-led practices of staff will emerge. Such celebrations may cement or validate the habits that colleagues have already established. In others, it may identify opportunities to encourage others to engage with such caught and taught approaches. Sought approaches to character development are often seen as 'extra-curricular' or 'enrichment', in that they can often take the form of going outside of one's area of expertise to enhance one's learning. For example, this may be achieved by attending events and lectures in fields or subjects outside of one's primary area of research interest. It may be by running events and activities to support ECR colleagues. More explicitly, organisations are embracing the benefits of providing staff with opportunities to volunteer, through formalised Corporate Social Responsibility activities, or informally through mentoring or inclusion of ECRs on grants and papers. Further, through enabling opportunities for students and staff to promote social awareness and make a positive difference outside of one's immediate area.

Conclusion

This paper has sought to foreground that there is a moral dimension to research culture in HEIs. Further, such a moral dimension should not be seen only as a short term 'fix' for any crisis or ills currently experienced in practice, but as a long-term obligation to create ethically sound research communities.

To achieve this, we can learn from the successes in embedding character education in schools and in professional training, particularly over the past decade, to cultivate morally positive, supportive cultures and communities that seek to develop the character and virtues of participants. Whilst work in this space in HEIs is limited, prioritising the moral development of colleagues is shown to lead to more purposeful, united and collegial working practices and environments (see Rhode, 1985; Carr, 2007; 2018). It is not a stretch to apply this to HEIs, with regards researchers and research culture.

The introduction of 'research culture' through the REF, for HEIs, has led to some good early examples of morally initiatives, such as the Flourish@Durham programme. Further, the creation of the National Centre for Research Culture at the University of Warwick, and the utilisation of moral language in many university strategies and external communications on research culture, demonstrates an awareness, at least at a linguistic level, that culture has a moral component.

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So, where we accept and agree that research culture does have a moral dimension, so we can and should learn from the examples of best practice that exist, be they from schools, organisations, or research institutes that are experts in the conceptualisation and practical application of character-building provision.

I end this article making two recommendations. Firstly, that where HEIs do embrace the moral dimension to research culture, that they demonstrate how it is more than a 'nice to have', rather as means to facilitate positive, impactful research. As prioritising the moral development of researchers can lead to an increase in sense of purpose in what a researcher does, this can lend itself positively to greater engagement with one's work, in one's community, and across the institution. Secondly, that a morally salient research culture can be cultivated through caught and taught approaches, as outlined above, that will lead to researchers seeking opportunities to do so. In this regard, where HEIs offer visible provision for cultivating morally focussed research culture initiatives, through caught and taught means, so, as proven with research in character education, researchers will seek out opportunities to sustain and lead such initiatives themselves.

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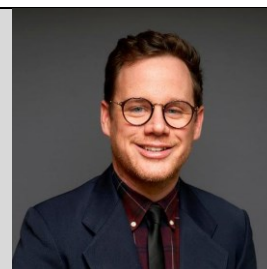
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