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Interdisciplinary collaboration for open research: reflections by Graduate Engagement Leads

This case study provides an in-role reflection by the Graduate Engagement Leads for Open Research at the University of York. It uses the methodologies of reflection in practice and reflection-on-the-future to explore the challenges, such as gaps in provision and knowledge between different disciplines, and opportunities, such as instigating new initiatives, that the Leads have faced. The case study integrates personal reflections on how the role has changed the Leads' outlooks and knowledge of open research, and how they hope to promote an open research culture in their professional and academic work. It also reflects on the anticipated future impacts of the role, such as through updating online resources for training and advocacy, as well as reflecting on how the role has influenced our approach to open research. Through reflecting on the role, it is hoped that this case study might provide a model for how PhD candidates working in open research and scholarly communications library teams can promote open research communities of practice and help to ensure their longevity.

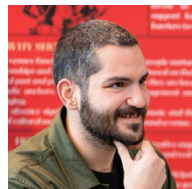
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Introduction

Fostering open research (OR) engagement across diverse research communities and disciplines is challenging. The University of York's Open Research Statement is intended for use across all disciplines. Capitalized 'University' and 'York' refer to the University of York throughout this article. Nonetheless, departments and faculties have different resources, dissemination methods and experience of OR, and adoption and perceived relevance also vary. The University of York Open Research Survey 2023/24 showed varying engagement levels and barriers across the faculties of sciences, social sciences and arts and humanities (Catt et al., 2024). To address OR challenges, the University's Open Research Strategy

Group launched an initiative to recruit three PhD researchers as Graduate Engagement Leads for Open Research commencing from August 2023.

The current Leads are researchers in the Departments of Politics and International Relations, Department of Archaeology and the Centre for Medieval Studies, and the two previous Leads were from the Departments of Psychology and Archaeology. The roles have provided fairly broad representation across each of York's academic faculties, but with more involvement from arts and humanities. The work was funded by Research England's 'Enhancing Research Culture' grant allocation, which was provided to enable the University to develop and initiate activities in response to the UK government's Research and Development (R&D) People and Culture Strategy, including the furthering of open research practices ([UK Research and Innovation, 2022](#)). It aimed for the Leads to use their experience as postgraduate researchers to facilitate the understanding and adoption of OR practices at faculty and university levels. This is an in-role reflection at a point when funding has been made available until July 2026.

The Leads support four objectives: training and advocacy; communication channels, networks and events; developing and maintaining current awareness; and the continuity and sustainability of activities. These objectives encompass various strands and are reviewed approximately every 3–4 months for relevance and focus.

This case study begins with the methodology for reflection and the motivations of the role. It then addresses some challenges the Leads faced based on reflective expressions, considers the role's opportunities and looks to future advocacy. The piece aims to showcase initiatives that promote a culture where OR is the default – a commitment the University outlined in its OR Statement (University of York, n.d.).

Reflective practices of the OR Graduate Engagement Leads

The following is our theoretical basis for reflection. Reflection as practice is understood as:

'the process of engaging with learning and/or professional practice that provides an opportunity to critically analyse and evaluate that learning or practice. The purpose is to develop professional knowledge, understanding and practice that incorporates a deeper form of learning which is transformational in nature and is empowering, enlightening and ultimately emancipatory' ([Black & Plowright, 2010, 246](#)).

Moreover, it is approached as 'a simple activity, a development of thinking that has associated with it a framework of different inputs, contexts and purposes that cause confusion for those who study it' ([Moon, 1999, Black & Plowright, 2010](#)). These definitions show reflective practices to be critical processes that can enhance professional knowledge by enabling learning, transformation and empowerment. This piece is grounded on two reflective practices: reflection-in-action ([Schön, 1995](#)) and 'reflection-on-the-future' ([Wilson, 2008; Greenall & Sen, 2016](#)).

Reflection-in-action refers to the process of thinking and adapting while engaged in an activity, rather than after completion ([Yanow & Tsoukas, 2009](#)). In our roles, reflection-in-action includes how we respond dynamically to OR challenges while fulfilling our duties. Specifically, we have experienced this when adjusting to disciplinary differences. From an arts and humanities perspective, the implementation of OR is limited, focusing on open access publications or public engagement. Therefore, this role required upskilling and research into other OR practices and principles, including some, such as study preregistration and methodology sharing, which were previously unknown and not easily applicable to research in our disciplines. Similarly, from a social science perspective, open access publication is the most popular practice, yet there are growing collaborative and participatory methods borne out of social justice and critical paradigms, aiming to transform discourse and research in the field.

'Reflection-in-action refers to the process of thinking and adapting while engaged in an activity, rather than after completion'

Furthermore, two of the three Leads employed in the first year moved on to other professional roles, and as such, two new Leads were recruited mid-initiative. The new Leads had to rapidly acquire knowledge about prior OR efforts at York, using as a guide the University of York Open Research Survey 2023/24 report and case studies ([Catt et al., 2024](#); [Muraina et al., 2024](#)). The case studies – as short-form content created by researchers affiliated with York – were particularly useful for familiarizing ourselves with different forms of OR, because of their wide-ranging scope, practical examples and explanations of why the author chose that form of OR.

Reflection-on-the-future is:

‘achieved by considering or imagining various possibilities and the strategies which are required to achieve them. By imagining or reflecting on what might be possible we are then able to develop operational strategies which hopefully will deliver the concrete reality’ ([Wilson, 2008, 179](#)).

In our case, such reflection included rethinking how resources can help the research community better understand, adopt and practice OR. This includes promoting our nascent ideas, such as AI’s role in OR and transforming the research landscape in Africa through OR. By reflecting on the future, we aspired to raise awareness of forward-looking OR practices through guides, blog posts and events, aiming to support future researchers and create lasting impact in publishing and research practices. The remaining sections of this article further elaborate on the reflective practices we employed.

‘By reflecting on the future, we aspired to raise awareness of forward-looking OR practices’

Challenges

As PhD researchers, we have a personal understanding of the OR challenges early career researchers (ECRs) face when framing, planning and promoting research and knowledge exchange in both independent and supporting roles. These challenges intersected with the Graduate Engagement Lead role.

One challenge included knowledge gaps, both within individual disciplines and especially for cross-disciplinary OR practices. For example, in certain science disciplines, some OR practices are seemingly well established, albeit with variation across departments; these may include open journal publications, preregistration, preprints and open data sharing and reuse. ([Catt et al., 2024](#)). As raised through an internal survey by the Humanities Research Centre in 2023, such practices are severely marginalized in arts and humanities due to their different research perspectives on data – in particular, a disciplinary approach which places researchers’ interpretation as the output. As Leads from different disciplines, we needed to understand and overcome our own biases and preconceptions regarding OR practices to serve a wider community across the University. For example, in the bi-weekly Leads meeting, we usually exchange information on what is tenable and popular in our various disciplines.

‘As Leads from different disciplines, we needed to understand and overcome our own biases and preconceptions’

Furthermore, we attended additional training, particularly on research data management, which was led by the library team. Such training enabled us to broaden our understanding of this area but also demonstrated how concepts of open data might be applied to various disciplines – for instance, the value of open research when working with both qualitative and quantitative data. It was, perhaps, useful that each of the Leads had interdisciplinary research experience. That is, coming from an arts and humanities or social science background, we were accustomed to handling and using data – for example, Katie and Yogos use archaeological data and Luqman uses ethnographic data. By completing this training and learning about specific practices in the context of science-based research from the awards and case studies, we could produce advocacy materials and we gained the knowledge required to engage in discussions with colleagues at events and conferences. Though learning these practices limited the time spent creating new advocacy materials

in this area, it has been invaluable and offered a broader perspective of routes into open research. Additionally, it built a firm foundation on which we could advocate for wider disciplines than our own through facilitatory and listening roles.

Reflecting on our incomplete knowledge, surveying the wider University community has been productive for considering resource demand and provision gaps. Furthermore, balancing our research demands with employment in support services placed us in a uniquely beneficial position of consulting on issues we felt were pertinent to researchers. This dual perspective allowed us to remain attuned to the realities of doctoral and early career researchers, such as time constraints, funding pressures and disciplinary publishing norms, while gaining insight into institutional priorities, policy developments and engagement opportunities. Consequently, we anticipated common challenges and offered feedback on library communications, events and resources. We provided additional information, such as details on funding applicability and barriers faced by postgraduate researchers when navigating open access routes. We also highlighted useful resources we were unaware of prior to the role, like the library's searchable list of open access journal titles for authors.

Through our own networks, we were able to think about what researchers need to know, especially around types of open publishing and concerns about future career progression. University of York Open Research Survey 2023/24 respondents noted the need for more resources in various independent learning formats, providing introductory overviews and specific information on open publishing ([Catt et al., 2024](#)). In response, we reflected on how to improve our OR Skills Framework LibGuide. The OR Skills Framework was created in February 2021 by the Open Research Operations Group action plan in response to a survey in 2020 that sought to identify existing awareness and provision. It was intended to be an evolving resource that could be developed to address further requirements as identified through appraisals of the guide and other surveys ([Catt & Smith, 2023](#)). A two-year review of the guide considered usage statistics and informal feedback alongside evidence around skills training provision raised in the 2023 OR survey.

We reconsidered how the guide serviced different disciplines and users, as well as its ability to platform researcher perspectives and function as an interactive tool. We made this more navigable with condensed key information, resulting in a one-web-page format with outward links to other sources of guidance, case studies and event recordings on our publicly accessible wiki space, hosted by the online platform Atlassian.

Issues around open access publishing can be compounded by researchers' career progression; that is, an early career researcher is likely to experience the benefits and disadvantages of open publication differently from permanent research staff. Yet, this provided an opportunity to consider how OR might mitigate some issues, especially for precariously employed researchers. We began to develop a lunchtime event aimed at research associates and alumni and hoped to gain interest from University-affiliated individuals with research positions – positions we may occupy post-PhD. However, due to time constraints and the surprising absence of York alumni who had recently published their theses as open access monographs, the event did not take place. The work completed will instead contribute to online information on publishing and be reserved for future initiatives. This process, however, was valuable because it demonstrated a specific gap for supporting and advocating open access monograph publishing amongst ECRs.

'an early career researcher is likely to experience the benefits and disadvantages of open publication differently from permanent research staff'

Another challenge was a lack of feedback and attendance. Drop-in workshops and a fortnight of OR discussion events organized in May 2024 received little interest. Yet, this presented opportunities for adaptability. We found that shorter, online events on a less regular basis were more successful, with well-engaged attendees who actively contributed to question-and-answer sections. These events felt like collaborative discussions, and they helped establish connections with researchers.

Opportunities

The role of Graduate Engagement Lead presented opportunities to foster, participate in and develop networks and engagement. A sub-objective was maintaining communication formats of bi-monthly newsletters, social media (especially BlueSky) and the York Open Research Advocates network. BlueSky enabled connections with OR networks, sharing achievements and events at York and beyond, whilst the newsletter shared case studies and training opportunities with internal subscribers. However, sustaining these efforts, especially the newsletter, is anticipated to be challenging after the role ends, requiring a more flexible approach in the future. Additionally, we joined the York Open Research Advocates Network – which welcomes researchers and support staff interested in promoting and developing OR culture – and were approached to suggest topics for events and to contribute as speakers. As Leads, we worked directly with the Open Research team in the library to create resources and events that served the OR community. The Advocates, as volunteers, often provided points of contact for researchers within the same departments. We hoped that joining the Advocates network would enable us to collaborate, especially through the Slack channel. However, due to time constraints and sparse engagement from the Advocates, we intend to revisit the network's purpose and relevance in the future.

Conference attendance enabled us to develop our networks within OR while learning about successful initiatives and ways to develop our own work. Presenting a poster on the York OR awards at the University of Manchester's Open Research Conference was valuable for sharing best practice and confirming that barriers to OR are comparable across institutions ([Vernon et al., 2025](#)). This conference was beneficial for listening to wider concerns in different disciplines, especially around high publication costs or issues with finding new routes for open research in formats like registered reports. Furthermore, by attending this conference, we were able to forge connections with academic support staff at the university, using social media like LinkedIn and BlueSky to connect. Presenting at the [UKSG 2025](#) conference on 'Enhancing Open Research Culture at the University of York: Lessons Learned from our Community of Practice' enabled learning about OR practices in other universities, increasing connections and identifying innovations potentially beneficial for the library ([UKSG, 2025](#)). Likewise, attending the N8 Pathways to Sustainable Scholarly Publishing event was useful for identifying which routes publishers and academics are taking or considering for OR. These events enabled us to develop our own knowledge and understanding of academics' and librarians' frustrations concerning the hegemony and inequality of profit-oriented and hegemonic publishers. A constructive outcome from attending these events, especially the University of Liverpool's online Open Research Week, means we were able to learn about how other universities have also hired PhD researchers as open research leads, using this role to form part of their own training and to develop advocacy. Within the time constraints of the role, we were not able to reach out to pool knowledge and resources; however, it would certainly be an avenue to consider this academic year.

'Conference attendance enabled us to develop our networks within OR'

We have also contributed to university events, which has enabled us to build networks across the institution and support activities. Our presentation 'Alternatives to the Western-controlled and traditional publication models' at the Africa Research Network's Summer School and Celebration Day 2025, on the 23rd and 24th of June, enabled reflection on how to take forward initiatives in the future ([Muraina, 2025](#)). This is important in the context of how other institutions maintained OR cultures amid a pressurizing higher-education environment with pervasive budget cuts. Sharing knowledge and success stories has been invaluable for thinking about continuity. At the Enhancing Research Culture workshop, we presented on enhancing ECR engagement and heard how the ReproducibiliTea journal club at different institutions had overcome issues with engagement through changing the frequency and type of events.

'Sharing knowledge and success stories has been invaluable for thinking about continuity'

Sitting on the judging panel for the OR awards scheme afforded us ways to think differently about implementing OR for varied disciplines and audiences. The case studies developed from the award submissions demonstrate many opportunities for sharing research in impactful ways online and with local communities. Especially interesting was the variety of research outputs: video games, open-source software packages, participatory and collaborative research projects and the creation of new platforms to disseminate information and encourage community participation. The awards were open to all members of the University, including categories which encouraged participation by students and ECRs. As such, the opportunity for all members of the University, including undergraduates, taught postgraduate students and University support staff, to integrate OR demonstrated potential for bringing about long-term change in the University and methods for supporting researchers in showcasing their work or building a portfolio. However, these awards may change in future due to funding uncertainties. This provides an opportunity to further reflect on how the purpose of these awards can be developed to ensure their longevity and continued success as an initiative for recognizing and incentivizing OR practice.

Looking to the future

Being early career researchers in this role means that we are at the forefront of new research methods – in particular, the rise in popularity of large language models and generative AI (genAI). Our basic knowledge and focus on University policies for academic conduct did not extend to issues like copyright, and so we deepened our knowledge through research and workshop attendance. It is hoped that our research on this topic will provide a future resource, and that the intersection of OR and genAI could make for a timely training session this academic year.

We hope to foster equitable changes in academic publishing. York-affiliated researchers have published in diamond open access publications, and those who have published long-form content in non-profit presses demonstrate how research can be open to everyone. Naturally, there is concern over where we publish, especially as ECRs who, given the realities of the job market, will be focused on high-profile, prestigious presses. However, through established academics publishing in a range of open access presses, it may be possible to present more varied options for academic publishing. Being involved in discussion events with researchers from other disciplines, like an event co-organized with the Department of Psychology on registered reports and the future of open peer review, has helped expand our knowledge of how research can be disseminated in innovative and open ways by communities of cross-disciplinary research staff, ECRs and University support staff.

Seeing the impact and benefits of OR on the community has inspired us to practice these principles. We think more carefully about where we publish and consider the audiences, academic and public, who wish to engage with our research. The role has greatly influenced our own perspectives on OR, motivating us to seek further opportunities for sharing our own research and even advocate for OR's relevance in other contexts, such as Africa. Future case studies have been posted on the implementation of OR principles in our own work ([Paschos, 2025](#); [Vernon, 2025](#)).

'Seeing the impact and benefits of OR on the community has inspired us to practice these principles'

Conclusions

The role of Graduate Engagement Leads for Open Research has been instrumental in changing the way in which we engage with OR. We were interested in this area prior to the role, but it has been eye-opening to see how much information and resources and practices were unknown to us, especially those beyond our primary disciplinary areas. By reflecting through the dual approach of 'reflection-in-action' and 'reflection-on-the-future', this article has demonstrated our experiences, hopes, ambitions, and what it feels like to work in a multidisciplinary role and serve a varying audience. This also includes sharing individual emotions on how an equality-oriented initiative like OR has remained stifled and sometimes

7 unpopular in the academic community, despite the various inequalities and feelings of dissatisfaction with existing practices.

We hope that the continual development of OR will make research more equitable, especially given the current employment market in higher education and therefore allow ECRs and academics in precarious employment to more easily continue to access and share research. Through this role, we hoped to develop a community which supports OR initiatives and reflects on the ways we disseminate our own research and prioritize OR.

'We hope that the continual development of OR will make research more equitable'

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Abbreviations and Acronyms

A list of the abbreviations and acronyms used in this and other *Insights* articles can be accessed here – click on the following URL and then select the 'full list of industry A&As' link: <http://www.uksg.org/publications#aa>.

Competing interests

The authors have declared no competing interests.

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